LOVE'S ECSTASY

MAY CHRISTIE

To Alice.
Xmas 1932.

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A NOVEL

BY

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THE GARDEN OF DESIRE
THE GILDED ROSE, ETC.

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CHAPTER I

On a bright Summer morning, at the wheel of her dilapidated, albeit serviceable, little car sat Miss Aleda Ray—young, pretty, forget-me-not-blue-eyed, and smiling—skimming along the Adirondacks roads with a celerity that was both risky and invigorating.

It was a heavenly morning, surely fashioned for romance and youth and happiness!

And Aleda was quite young—not yet three and twenty.

Romantic? Certainly! Though up here in the mountains no one had touched that unawakened heart.

And happy? Ah! of course, in a queer, excited manner, for—like Alexander launching forth on new worlds to conquer—wasn't she setting out on the morrow to the "Big City" on her first job?

"Oh! Gorgeous!" She had rounded a corner, and far below her in a pine-fringed hollow, gleaming like a bright blue jewel, lay the shimmering loveliness of Indian Lake. Between her and the water buttercups starred the meadows with a blaze of gold. After the night's rain the sun was drawing forth a heavenly odor from the balsam, and the pine, the hemlock, and the clover, and Aleda—pulling up the car—drank in long breaths of perfume that were exquisite.

"A morning for romance! One ought to meet one's

lover!" Up here in the mountains she had got into the habit of thinking out aloud. She descended from the rickety contraption, exhibiting—had anybody been there to see it!—two remarkably pretty nether limbs (sans stockings!) that could have held their own with any stage beauty, and waded into the lush green meadows on a four-leaf clover quest.

For quaint superstition—let us confess it at the outset—had allured Aleda here.

She wanted Luck. Some token of justification for the Great Step on the morrow.

And today, here in this magic beauty spot, she felt that Luck must certainly mean Love!

Didn't the soft airs blowing over Indian Lake, and lifting the curly tresses of her unbobbed hair, caress her? and the perfume of the clover and the heady odor of green, spicy things remind her of a great love epic in the Bible—wasn't it the Song of Solomon?

Love! Mating! Ecstasy!

The whole secret of Life!

And over her head on a hemlock bough a bluejay, perching arrogantly, shook an azure wing at her, as though to say:

"Wake up! Don't be a fool, you silly little human!"

"I'll show you!" said Aleda jauntily, and searched amid the clover that, with the "paint-brush" flowers and buttercups, studded the green grass. Then, with a long breath: "Criminee! I've got it!" rose to her feet, triumphantly holding aloft the tiny, sprayed four-leaf.

And at the moment came the loud honk of an approaching car.

"Good heavens! My car! Almost blocking the corner!" Aleda came to earth, ran hastily back into the road.

It had rained the previous night, and just at this very point, where maple, spruce and poplar fringed the highway, it was black and slippery. Before Aleda could jump into her machine and steer it further to the side, calamity occurred—almost before she'd time to realize what had happened—in the shape of a big car driven at reckless speed around the bend . . . a sudden grinding of the brakes to dodge her little car . . . a fearful skid . . . the front off-wheel catching in the ditch . . . the car turning turtle, and with a sickening thud hurling the solitary passenger thirty feet along the road!

Aleda screamed, turned sick and dizzy. There at her feet, like a defeated giant, groaning, lay the machine upon its side. Its driver, shaken but apparently unhurt, had scrambled out and was dazedly limping towards the unconscious passenger.

With a mighty effort Aleda pulled herself together, switched off the engine of the car and ran to the prostrate figure lying in the road.

White to the lips and trembling at the knees, she gasped: "Oh, is he—dead?"

"Mebbe. Dunno. He's—bleeding." The driver—Aleda recognized him as the chauffeur from the local inn—was shaking like an aspen leaf as he knelt beside the injured man. "That goldarned car of yours——"

"I know. I'm sorry. Here—help me pull him to the side—here on the ferns." A strength had come to her. She put two hands underneath his shoulders, and, assisted by the driver, gently dragged him to the grass.

There was a gash upon his forehead—a spatter of blood trickling down.

"I'll run and get some water. Give me your hat—it'll do!" She rushed to a little tinkling stream close by,

filled the queer receptacle and hurried back. Then, to the driver: "I haven't a handkerchief."

"Nor I, miss."

She stooped down and ripped off the deep hem of her white linen dress—then tore the hem in two pieces—one half as a bandage, the other as a towel to bathe that injured head. She knelt on the grass, dipped the linen in the water and commenced "first aid."

"You take my car and go for help. I'll see to him," she said.

The driver disappeared. Aleda, left alone, bent over the pale, calm face.

He was quite young—not more than twenty-five, she thought—and handsome—yes! A little trickle of blood, escaping from the wet bandage, had gone into his thick, dark hair. She wiped it off. She suddenly felt extraordinarily protective—just as though she were his mother—he a little boy—her boy!

He should not die. She would not let him die. That sensitive mouth—the finely cut and mobile features—they must sparkle with the light of life again—be young and gay and vital—smile at her——

The hot tears welled beneath her lids—as impulsively and yearningly she stooped and kissed the dark hair up above the bandages, as though from her own young lips she would transmit warm life to him.

"Look at me! Speak!" she whispered.

The dark lashes fluttered, lifted, and: "Hallo!" said a shaky voice as forget-me-not blue eyes gazed into gray. Blue eyes—"just a little bit of heaven!" as she afterwards phrased it—were fixed on gray eyes—just as though those orbs had hypnotized her—or was it a bolt that passed between them from the quiver of the little blind god?

CHAPTER II

THERE by the roadside in the Adirondacks, with shafts of golden sunshine filigreeing through the nodding maples, to make dancing patterns on their faces, Aleda's forget-me-not blue eyes looked into gray.

Gray eyes, at first vaguely, then with the light of returning consciousness, drank in the details of that pretty, tear-stained, anxious face.

That butterfly touch of warm young lips upon his hair? He hadn't dreamed it?

And what, in heaven's name, was he doing here by the road?

"Don't move. The accident——" As he made an attempt to struggle into a sitting posture, this unknown damsel slipped an arm beneath his shoulders, and, curled up like a dryad, supported that infernally aching head of his against her knees. "Stay still. I'll change the bandage——" Ah! heavenly coolness of water on his brow!

His eyes closed drowsily. The ache lessening, he was sinking into delicious peace. After a nightmare dream of shock and pain, could this be heaven?

The angel? He opened his eyes again, and gazed into a bit of heaven's own blue. . . .

She was a somewhat tattered angel, bare-legged, with a torn, frayed skirt—but oh! that apple-blossom face!

And eyes—he couldn't get beyond those eyes—like wet forget-me-nots, he told himself poetically.

She'd kissed him, hadn't she? Those warm, compassionate young lips of hers had sent a thrill throughout his being, galvanized him back to life. . . .

He didn't wish to move. He felt—oh! queer it was! —too utterly content. Like this—against her soft, sweet body—with the sun streaming downward through the trees upon the apple-blossom face so close to his, he could see over and beyond it the wide expanse of flower-dotted meadow leading down to the blue jewel of a lake.

"Spring in the Austrian Tyrol?" Wasn't there a famous picture—or a replica? The tinkling little stream nearby reminded him of cowbells he had often heard in Europe—and this pretty bare-legged damsel in the tattered gown must surely be—a milkmaid?

This was the life . . . this nearness to the soil . . . Spring ecstasy! He dwelt in the idyllic moment.

And then the milkmaid said—and all the music of the Spring seemed in her voice, although the query was a quaint one:

"Where does it hurt the most?"

The strange young man with the bandaged head made even quainter answer. "In my heart," he said.

At that, the apple-blossom face turned to a deep rose.

"You're joking. And I thought that you were—dead!"

"I am. I'm dead to all life's bores and worries and uglinesses, at this minute. This is heaven," he said.

She gave a soft and throaty little laugh. He thought it blended with the cowbells—or was it the tinkle of the nearby stream?

"Then, if I'm an angel, I am on the wing!" Her supporting arm slipped from his shoulders. She half arose.

"Don't go. I understand now . . . there was a

smash . . ." The sea-gray eyes roved to the overturned machine that lay half in the ditch. His face went white. His hand—a capable, finely molded hand that looked as though it had worked hard—groped for Aleda's, caught it vaguely, he slumped back suddenly upon the grass, his eyes closed.

She ran to the stream and got more water, dabbed it on his face and neck. Poor boy! Perhaps for all his brave insouciance, badly injured? She chafed his hands, undid the collar of his rough blue denim shirt.

Would help never come? There was an ominous pallor round that finely chiselled mouth. That frightened her. She thrust a shaking hand under his jacket, over his heart.

Ah, yes! It still was beating. She dabbed more water on his forehead, on his face.

It was a handsome face—clean-cut, and bearing a strange refinement, despite the rough laborer's clothes. The straight and finely modeled nose and strong, square chin were quite in the patrician manner. The eyes, with the long lashes resting on the sunburnt cheek, were closed.

Who could he be? There were deep fountains of romance in this Aleda, and her heart went out in sympathy to the unknown, helpless youth. Hadn't her own carelessness been the cause of the disaster? Suppose he died, or were permanently injured, it certainly would be *her* fault!

Her heart thudded in remorse—or was it something more?—as she worked over him, striving to "bring him to" again.

And then the dark lashes opened, and the sea-gray eyes were on her face.

" 'Fraid I made a darn fool of myself. I'm sorry."

"Now you lie still until the doctor comes."

"All right. I'm tired—dog-tired——" His voice

trailed into silence. Tears spattered Aleda's face. One fell upon his cheek. She wiped it away, tenderly. With the water-soaked bandages, she staunched the blood upon his brow.

His lips moved wordlessly. She stooped her head, put her ear close to his mouth.

"What is it? Let me help. I'm here——" Oh, God! let him get better! Perhaps there was some spinal injury that would make him permanently a cripple? Perhaps—oh! frightful tragedy! and never, never would she forgive herself!—he had a fractured skull, serious internal hurts (how white his face was!) or a broken back?

He was muttering vaguely—she could barely hear it—something about cowbells . . . and Spring in the Tyrol . . . and a milkmaid!

Tears running down her cheeks—a "something" new and wonderful and agonizing in her heart—she whispered: "Tell me. Speak."

And then the words came quaintly, but distinctly:

> "'Now, won't you marry me, my Pretty Maid?'
> 'I'm going a-milking, Sir!' she said."

He was delirious—she knew it—but the words of the old nursery rhyme caught at her heart. Her whole being seemed surcharged with a strange ecstasy—of fear—and bliss—and agony—and hope.

There was the sudden honk-honk of her own approaching car. Beside the driver sat the village doctor. He had come, at last!

"Stand back, and I'll make a quick examination before we move him." The doctor bent over the still figure on the grass.

Aleda waited . . . trembling——

What would the doctor's verdict be?

CHAPTER III

BEFORE the little mirror in her bedroom stood Aleda Ray.

It was early morning. Dew still lay upon the grass outside her window. A skylark rose and soared into the blue.

So did her thoughts. They harked back to the amazing and disturbing incidents of yesterday—to the young man of the motor-smash.

He had made quick recovery. Indeed, the doctor had assured her that he was practically all right now.

"Another day of rest—and the concussion will be entirely gone," the medico had said.

There were no broken bones—internal injuries. Aleda voiced an inner paean of thanksgiving over that.

His name was Gary Chester, and he was an engineer. Electrical. Something to do with reports on the Hudson water power, she had been told.

She'd gone twice to the local inn yesterday to make inquiries regarding the invalid. She was much too shy to enter, and on her second trip the doctor himself had come down to the door.

"You're positive he'll be all right?"

"As right as rain," the medico had said. He knew and liked Aleda.

"The accident was all my fault for leaving my car

right at the bend of the road. The other car skidded, trying to avoid it."

"The other car's no worse off than my patient—so you just hold your peace. D'you want the inn to start a suit for damages against you, miss?"

"Did 'he' say that?" (The "he" was Gary Chester.) "Did—did he mention me at all?"

"Not in my hearing. Though if the young chap hadn't been unconscious—with those eyes of yours—you'd have done considerably more damage to him than you already did. Shall I take up a message—an apology?"

"No. No." She flushed. Her hands shook a little. "Don't mention my name—I'm off to New York tomorrow anyway—I'll never see him again—but please just give him this." She thrust an open envelope into the doctor's hand—then hurried off.

Manlike, his curiosity got the better of him, and, as the packet was already unsealed, he took a peek inside.

"Well, I'll be goldarned, if women ain't odd!"

It was the four-leaf clover she had plucked—the harbinger of luck!

* * * * * *

"Hurry, Aleda! Your breakfast's ready and the coffee getting cold. It's nearly time for you to start." Her mother's voice, a little quaver in it, floated up to her.

The car was already at the gate, the new tin trunk set in the rear.

Aleda gave another glance into the mirror. If this were only Hallowe'en—wasn't there a quaint and fascinating superstition that over her shoulder would appear her lover's face?

Half-closing her eyes now—letting her fancy have full rein—(and memory!)—it actually did seem as though

there in the mirror were the handsome, manly features that had so thrilled her yesterday!

"Ale-e-da! 'Lee-da! Hi!"

The spell was broken.

"Coming, mother." She jerked her new little hat (of navy, like her suit, because it was most serviceable) down over her eyes (for fear the dear old folks downstairs might read the dreams therein, maybe?), caught up her pocketbook and gloves, ran jauntily to the living room, hastily swallowed the food.

"You'll write often, Aleda, won't you?" Her mother fussed about her, "for all the world like a darling, clucking old hen whose chicken is taking to the water," said her daughter, teasingly.

That made them smile, brought a chuckle to the lips of dad, although she realized they tried to cover up the ache in their hearts.

What would the little, tumble-down farm be like, without her? There would be no gay voice, no bubbling youth, no cheeriness!

But after dad's long illness—he hadn't the strength to work as formerly—and mother getting old and tired, *money* was required.

She'd earn that money . . . send all of the weekly pay envelope that she could spare home to the old folks.

Oh, yes, her going away was needful—and right!

But tears ached at her throat. She *loved* them so. Could have cried over dad's huge frame now gone so weak—over mother's sparse gray tresses, and shoulders bowed so pitifully.

"I'll write every blessed day, dear Lovey Lucy!" She kissed her mother tenderly, tweaked dad's moustache (today it seemed to have lost its jaunty and up-curling air), swallowed heroically, blinked back the tears, and

walked with lifted head between the pair, out to the gate and into the waiting car.

"I'll leave the car at the depot, and Farmer Jones will drive it back when his train gets in," she said—kissed the old folks again—waved gaily—and was gone.

Aleda sat in her corner of the Pullman, gazing out at the flying landscape and at beautiful Lake George with sad, blurred eyes.

She was leaving much behind her. Mother and dad.

A hope, too—a queer, unexpressed longing. She'd thought that "he"—one Gary Chester—having no doubt heard from the doctor or the inn folks of her departure (wasn't the inn a hotbed of all gossip?)—she'd hoped that he, getting the four-leaf clover as a good luck token, might have sent a message, to the train!

He hadn't bothered. Now, without further meeting, she was going far away.

That ended it. Put the lid down heavily upon romance.

Oh! foolish she had been—school-girlish! What was it he had called her—a milkmaid?

Leave it at that. She was a country "rube"—and he (according to rumor, and despite the roughness of his costume) a brilliantly clever engineer.

At this juncture Aleda became gradually conscious of a woman—a peroxide-headed blonde—sitting across the aisle and steadily regarding her.

Their eyes met. The woman—she was gaudily dressed, but had a kind face—rose. She crossed the foot or two of passage, dropped into an empty seat beside Aleda, smiled in friendly fashion, said in a husky voice: "Now what's the trouble, kid? You lonesome? Let us talk."

CHAPTER IV

THERE in the swaying Pullman that was bearing her so rapidly from home to new adventure, Aleda was flushed and hesitant about accepting the blonde woman's overtures.

"Lonesome? And homesick? *I* know . . ." The newcomer, who had crossed the aisle and dropped into the chair beside Aleda, nodded in a kind and understanding fashion, her eyes—that were over-emphasized by the use of blue pencil and mascara—on the tear-stained, apple-blossom face.

The husky, oddly attractive voice held a real sympathy. The sensitive mind of Aleda registered that fact.

"I'm going to New York and get my first job." Almost against her own volition—for there was a certain magnetism about this stranger that compelled an answer—the words were out.

"And frightened as the dickens? Right at this minute you'd fling all your ambitions to Timbuctoo if you could run right back?"

Aleda laughed. She made a quick and surreptitious move to brush away the tell-tale tears. She said, protesting: "Oh, I *want* to work. I have to. It's just the idea—of a big, strange city—where you don't know a soul——"

"Of course. I get you. Stage-fright. You'll soon get

over that on Broadway. I take it you *are* heading for the stage?"

"Oh, no——" —a startled look in the forget-me-not eyes. "It's a stenographic job I'm looking for. I took my certificate in typing and bookkeeping and shorthand a short while back."

"Wise child! Take it from me that's a much safer bet —though with your looks and figure—how old are you? Not twenty-one?"

"I'm nearly twenty-three," replied Aleda, stiffening. She was again dubious about this free-and-easy questioning.

"Ever did any singing? Can you dance?"

"Oh, just a very little." Aleda turned her head away and gazed out at the passing scenery of beautiful Lake George.

"Don't think me fresh, because I'm interested in you. 'S'matter of fact, you remind me a bit of my little sister—she's a beauty—I was just thinking, if you don't land that stenographic job, that we might use you in a 'song-and-dance.' "

"A—what?" Aleda turned from contemplation of the flying landscape. Her blue eyes were wide.

"Ha! You don't know the ropes. I meant, my sister and I might work you into a cabaret. I'm a night club hostess and entertainer. We've got a cute little place we call the 'Harvest Moon.' With your peach-bloom looks you'd fit in grand with the title——"

Aleda was startled. She drew back at once. "Oh, no. I wouldn't dream of it."

The woman laughed good-naturedly. The dismay in the wide eyes quite touched her heart. A little greenhorn —timid of the big city, terrified by any chance suggestion —if her own young sister, Goldie, only had that charm,

that flying sweetness, she'd be double the attraction she already was!

"All right. Don't worry. Let's just talk a bit." The woman settled herself more deeply in her chair, opened a beaded bag that seemed oddly incongruous with her traveling "tailored," and handed Aleda a card.

"Marise de Renze," read the girl. She said: "Oh, that's a pretty name!"

Marise de Renze smiled, gratified, although her eyes were suddenly wistful. "If you only knew it, the name's a lot flossier than *I* am, in my heart!"

And at that, Aleda Ray, the sensitive and reserved young country girl, did an unexpected act. She put her hand out, quickly and impulsively, over the older woman's and said: "I like you——"

"Then we are friends," Marise de Renze said.

They talked for hours, those two, there in the lurching train that was carrying them swiftly to New York.

Aleda told herself, with a sure intuition: "She is kind to me because she isn't very happy herself."

"I suppose," said Aleda tentatively—and curious—"you come across a great number of men in your night club life?"

"*Do* I! I'll say!" Marise drew a quick breath. "But I can take care of myself. And when it comes to chaperoning Goldie, everyone knows I'm the wolf's teeth!"

Aleda laughed merrily, flung back— "But it was the wolf who *wanted* to devour Red Riding Hood——!"

Said Marise: "No one will devour *my* little red-head sister while *I'm* about!"

And then, her mood changing, she suddenly began to talk about a certain Englishman. "A sort of a beau of mine," she remarked, explanatory-wise. "You couldn't help but like him, he's got so much *charm!* And lovely

manners! And so well-dressed and *smart*—I say he always looks as though he'd been *poured* into his clothes! The only trouble is——" —she grew expansive to this sympathetic listener—"although he's very clever and highly educated, he doesn't seem to get along here in the States. About holding down jobs, you know. He's very sensitive, and well-born, and refined, is Clive. I sometimes think people get *jealous* of him—men can be awfully jealous, as much as women!—and they don't give him a square deal. Over and over again, he comes to me, quite downcast——"

At this crucial moment in the narrative, Aleda and her friend were summoned to the diner for the mid-day meal. And over the fried chicken and sweet potatoes, Marise suddenly remarked: "Good as this dinner is, believe me *I* can cook a better! Say, where are you going to stay in New York?"

"I thought I'd go to the 'Y,' or maybe find a cheap boarding house——"

"I've an old-fashioned house on West Fortieth," announced Marise. "I rent out rooms—it's large—it's comfortable—why don't you come and stay with Goldie and with me?"

CHAPTER V

THE train gliding into New York City. Red-capped porters darting hither and yon. Marise de Renze for the tenth time dabbing a fluff of powder on her nose, adjusting her red hat in the strip of mirror, looking about anxiously for her "sort of a beau"—the Englishman!

Aleda thrilled—but at the same time shy and lonely! This great city, in which she was but a grain of desert sand. . . .

"Oh, there he is!" Marise rushed forward to a tall, good-looking, weak-chinned man. They kissed. Over Marise's shoulder his near-set eyes fastened—with appreciation on Aleda Ray. He said something—Marise turned—made the introduction: "This is my little friend —meet Mr. Clive Mortimer."

Then Marise firing a whole volley of questions. She'd had lots of luck in Montreal—she'd "got the goods," she said. At the Harvest Moon, how was business going? Goldie's new dance? Any new customers?

She had Clive by the arm—about to go—Aleda evidently forgotten. And then the Englishman made some suggestion—Marise frowned—shook her head. She gave a quick glance at Aleda, murmured: "Maybe later—today I'm too busy." Then, after a second's hesitation, gave the girl the number of her telephone.

"If you don't get suitably fixed up, give us a tinkle."

She nodded, pulled Clive towards the gates—and they were gone.

A little dashed—and dazed—Aleda followed a porter through the vast precincts of the station—like the interior of some glorious cathedral, wasn't it? She felt immeasurably alone.

Her trunk stowed on a taxi. Ferociously speedy drive through crowded streets. The clang of cars, the scream of sirens, and—what on earth was that extraordinary contraption overhead?—the rattle of the "elevated." Rounding a corner on two wheels, the driver pulled up sharply, and in a moment Aleda found herself in a hotel lobby that was as wide and long and crowded as a street.

In the excitement of arrival, and dashed by Marise's sudden loss of interest in herself (had Marise been jealous over the weak-chinned "beau"?), Aleda had given the name of—not the "Y"—but the only hotel of which she'd heard.

"A room please? And the cheapest?" The smartness of the clerks and sudden realization of her error in coming here—she had *so* little money!—made her afraid.

"Right—$4.50 a night. Take the lady to 2468, please."

An "express" elevator shot her like a bullet from a sporting rifle—up to heaven, it seemed! She followed a floor clerk along the corridors and into a neat, lighted, cell-like room.

From far below there came the muffled roar of Broadway. The door clicked shut behind the floor clerk. Aleda was alone.

* * * * * *

Morning. A roll and coffee in a crowded, jostling, white-tiled restaurant.

Then the search for WORK.

The round of agencies. It was discouraging. "Got no experience? No references? That makes it difficult for you," they said.

New York was full of girls, it seemed, who wanted jobs. Experienced girls who'd already worked in big offices—competent stenographers—some of them even knowing foreign languages—and highly trained.

On the third afternoon—when she was all tired out and dreadfully discouraged an agency sent her to a legal firm. A thin-lipped lawyer gave her quick dictation. Aleda—nervous, and not understanding the meaning of the ponderous terms—made several blunders. She was asked to leave.

That night—(tomorrow was a Saturday, therefore a "half" day, so it was unlikely it would bring her better luck)—she wept salt tears onto her pillow. New York had diminished her small funds by $24.50. She was lonely, homesick, utterly cast down. She must leave this horrible hotel. But where to go? She cried herself to sleep.

* * * * * *

"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning," so the Scriptures say.

At exactly half-past eight Aleda's telephone aroused her—with an offer from an agency.

A firm of Wall Street bankers—William B. Lingard & Co.—required a "temporary stenographer" at once. The private secretary, quite a young woman, had been suddenly taken sick and was to be operated on. She had just rung up the agency—the woman in charge happened to be a friend of hers—William B. Lingard was "fussy"—her substitute must be a competent girl, quiet and well-bred.

The woman of the agency had liked Aleda's manner, had been sorry for her. So she got the chance.

Promptly at half-past nine, Aleda was at the Wall Street office, and before the desk. This time she wasn't nervous. So much was now at stake that she was icy-calm and cool.

She took William B. Lingard's dictation—which was much more lucid than the lawyer's—perfectly. Transcribed her notes on the typewriter neatly, accurately, and with dispatch.

At twelve she was called again into the boss's office. He was satisfied with her, and gave her further letters. When his desk-telephone rang, he said into the instrument: "Tell him to wait until I'm through——" went on dictating methodically.

And then, when he had finished, and Aleda—notebook in hand, was leaving the room—he said: "Ask Mr. Gary Chester to step in——"

Gary Chester? Impossible? It *couldn't* be . . .? Her heart rose in her throat, as though to suffocate her . . . mechanically her feet crossed the floor, turned the door handle, went into the outer room. . . .

And there he stood, the handsome, gray-eyed man who since their fateful meeting in the mountains had filled her heart and mind, oh, so disturbingly!

And in his buttonhole she saw there was a tiny, four-pronged clover leaf!

CHAPTER VI

ALEDA stood in William B. Lingard's outer office, her startled blue eyes on Gary Chester's face.

Her heart was racing. Breath was catching. Because of the excitement that was surging through her, she was dumb.

"*He*" had come here! Had business in this office! Fate had thrown the two of them, so strangely met, together again!

Oh! this was Kismet! On the lap of the gods it had been decreed that they would have this second meeting, and this second chance!

"Is Mr. Lingard ready to see me?" Gary Chester spoke. His tone was formal. He was looking at Aleda pleasantly, albeit curiously—yet there was no light of recognition on his handsome face!

Had he forgotten her so soon? On the occasion of the motor-smash, had she been, then, but a blur, a fleeting vision, before his uncertain gaze?

"Yes, Mr. Lingard will see you. Go in." Her lips framed the words mechanically.

Then, as he moved forward, passing through the door that led into the inner office, and closing it behind him, she sank into the chair before her desk.

He had not recognized her! She was nothing in his mind but an ordinary office clerk!

The thought burned in her consciousness.

And yet—her heart rose again—he wore her four-leaf clover! The wearing of it—knowing that she, his rescuer, had been the sender—must, then, carry *some* significance for him . . .?

Or had he thought that she had been too bold? Had he really recognized her, and meant to deliver a snub? She was only a stenographer, like thousands of others in this city, and he, apparently, a man of affairs. . . .

"So you've fallen for him, head over ears?" The sibilant whisper of a Spanish-looking girl who was filing some documents near Aleda, roused her, and she found herself looking into a gardenia-white, scarlet-lipped face. That mouth was mocking. The dark eyes were narrow, and set slant-wise. "Everyone does. Even the boss's niece, and she's worth quarter of a million. Comes here, tracking him, in her Rolls-Royce. But Gary Chester's mind is on his work—not women. Oh, you can bet that he'll amount to something—he's no fool—he'll rise!"

Aleda had flushed deeply, her gaze down-bent upon the curly shorthand symbols. She didn't want this prying, mocking girl to see the hurt look in her eyes.

"You needn't get huffy. I grant you he's mighty attractive, and we women are all alike. A good-looking man with charm—and Gary Chester has got 'IT,' you can take it from me—plays football with our silly hearts. Not that I intend to be silly any longer—I'm wise to these handsome fellows, and their here-today-and-gone-tomorrow ways!"

Aleda swallowed. The girl's words hurt her, and yet she was burning to know more about this Gary Chester . . .

"He makes reports for Lingard on different engineering projects," went on the other, "if you're going to set your cap for him"—this with a stinging little laugh—

"you'd better hurry. I hear he's being sent abroad. Something to do with investigating some water power—in Italy, on behalf of Lingard—though personally I think the niece is playing her own cards. The latest is *she's* going to Europe pretty soon. She'll make her route run into his, you bet. She's dotty over him."

Aleda started to transcribe her shorthand notes. Her capable young fingers shook a little. She hit the wrong keys once or twice, and had to make erasures and corrections. Oh! if she didn't do better than this, William B. Lingard would dismiss her—he was "fussy"—he would get another secretary!

But that was best, she told herself, her heart aflame with disappointment and pain. Better to remove herself forever from any chance of a further sight of Gary Chester. Why, when the man was such a fascinator, and had so many women after him—why put herself in the way of being hurt by him?

Through the thin partition she could hear the fine timber of his voice, and then William B. Lingard's tones.

Another error in her letters! Her mood changing—challenging this stupid feeling—she forced her mind upon the keys. She'd keep this job—she hadn't any money, and she *had* to keep it—no one, not even the most fascinating man on earth, should drive her off!

Shadows were moving on the frosted glass panels of the inner office, the door opened and the two men appeared.

"In about four weeks' time I shall hold myself in readiness——" Chester was saying, "and then you can arrange my sailing date."

He did not give one glance toward Aleda. He shook hands with Lingard brusquely, and was off.

The latter went to Aleda's desk and lifted the letters from the wire basket, glancing over them.

"You'll do. Be here at 9 on Monday. Your salary will be $30 a week."

Fifteen minutes later she was jammed, just like a sardine, in the crowded subway, one of ten thousand other girls all struggling to go home. *Home?* Tears ached at her throat when she thought of the little farm where the old folks would be missing her—while here in this congested, rushing city there was not one soul to care——!

Her mind revolted from the loneliness and expense of the big hotel. She must—at once—find cheaper lodgings. Where?

Her thoughts went back to her companion of the railroad journey, the tow-headed, kindly—though fickle—Marise!—she'd phone her—Marise might remember her own suggestion, and again be in a friendly mood!

God! how she did want one friend in this great city! Her heart sore because Gary Chester had not recognized her, she felt she could not bear it if Marise, too, had forgotten her——!

At Times Square she struggled through the crowds along the platform and up and out into the daylight. She went into a drug store, found a booth, and dropping a nickel in the slot, gave Marise's phone number with palpitating heart.

Marise herself answered the call. Did she remember the girl she had talked to, in the train, coming from Lake George? *Did* she! "Why, sure!" Marise gave the number of her house in West 40th Street. "Come over at once!"

Because of the cordiality in the husky voice, tears sprang to Aleda's eyes. Someone *did* wish to see her—someone in this great, solitary, crowded city was a friend, after all!

She hurried across 42nd Street and Broadway, dodging

the traffic nervously. At length she reached the old-fashioned house in the West Forties, went up the steps, and rang the bell.

As no one came, Aleda leaned over and looked into the window that was close to the door-post. There was a sound of music——

There at the piano, his long white fingers sliding over the keys, was the Englishman, Clive Mortimer. And, with her arm about his shoulders, singing, was Marise . . .

CHAPTER VII

ALEDA, looking in at the front window of Marise's old-fashioned house in the West Forties, glimpsed the tableau at the piano. The Englishman, Clive Mortimer, was playing dreamily, and Marise crooning a song.

Again that "unwanted" feeling touched the girl. She was still hurt by Gary Chester's failure to acknowledge her. She felt immeasurably alone. Surely Marise, her arm possessively resting on the shoulders of the player, wouldn't want a third party to intrude upon her tete-a-tete? Nothing but kindness, and pity for Aleda's loneliness, had prompted the invitation to come here . . .?

Her impulse was for flight. At once. She turned to run.

But at that moment a negro woman opened the front door. The singing ceased. "That you, my dear?" There was a whiff of perfume, a flutter of scarlet chiffon draperies as Marise ran forward through the dividing curtains, into the hall, to greet her guest. "Come right in. You're as welcome as June roses!"

Oh, genuine was Marise's welcome! Happy was Marise's light, thrilling laugh!

Handsome she looked, in her gay frock of red. Her lips matched her dress exactly, her teeth—extraordinarily even—were a flash of white. Even with the sunlight filtering in through the high windows of the living room into which Marise led the girl, the former looked much

younger and more vital than she had on their previous meeting in the train.

"Clive dear, you remember my little country friend, Miss Ray?"

The Englishman turned on the piano stool with a lazy air.

"Chawmed to meet you, I'm sure." He held out a white, indolent-looking hand. His eyes, set much too close together for attractiveness, narrowed as he surveyed the girl.

Marise watched him like a hawk. He was well aware of the older woman's scrutiny. He would commit no error, while she was about.

"Here, take Miss Ray's hat and coat, and put them in the hall cupboard, like a good boy." In kindly fashion, Marise fussed about Aleda. "Dinner will be ready in two shakes——"

"Speaking of shakes," drawled Clive, returning to the living room after taking away the wraps, "reminds me of the cocktail shaker. Don't you think, Marise, our little—er—arrangement—is worthy of a fitting celebration? What?"

"Not in the middle of the day, bad boy!" Marise shook her fore-finger at him and seemed in great fettle. Then, to Aleda: "I've just given our black sheep a job. He's going to help me run the 'Harvest Moon,' on a commission basis."

"And so we'll drink to the success of the new venture." He pressed the bell-push, summoning the negro woman. "Three oranges—and ice. And make it snappy."

"Of all the nerve!" rebuked Marise. Then, to Aleda: "Clive has such a way with him—so lordly and sort of condescending—like all his countrymen—I just *can't* get mad at him!"

Clive sank into the most comfortable chair, stretching out his long, beautifully-tailored legs. He drawled, nonchalantly: "You women over here require a master. This vaunted independence of American females is all rot. There wouldn't be one-twentieth of the divorces in the United States if MAN was the boss as is the case in Europe. And, if you only knew it, women are much happier when they don't get everything their own way, but have to take their orders from the superior will, which should be found only in the male sex."

"Hence your fatal fascination?" laughed Marise. From a red-leather pocketbook on the piano she quickly pulled out a little mirror and a powder-puff. "But——" —challengingly—"even if we American women are big bullies, you will hand it to us, won't you, for good looks?"

"Most certainly." Clive bowed in such a patronizing fashion that Aleda could have slapped the man. "Even all over Europe it's conceded that American women are handsome, and wear their clothes better than any other women can. Why, then, not take up a graceful position, and stop this eternal struggle for domestic dominance?"

"Hark at him! Isn't he the learned lad?" giggled Marise, powdering her nose and looking in her pocket-mirror.

"An insufferable pig!" Aleda told herself. "How can a woman stand for him?"

Through the curtains appeared the head of the negro maid. "No oranges, ma'am."

Said Marise to Clive: "Must you really have that cocktail now?"

He raised his eyebrows, put a finger to his lips with what he thought was a provocative and appealing air.

With his left hand he drew out a gold flask from his pocket. "Here's the nectar of the gods."

With a whispered word to Aleda, Marise hurried from the room.

The moment she was gone, Clive dropped a little of his nonchalance.

"How d'you like New York?" He picked up a package of cigarettes, offered her one, then, when she declined, helped himself.

"It's very—thrilling," answered Aleda slowly, "just a little overwhelming, maybe——"

The Englishman leaned back in the armchair, jerked his trousers at the knee, to save the creases, and crossed his long immaculately clothed legs.

"Don't let New York scare you. Everything in this town is one big bluff!" he said.

Aleda quietly regarded the good-looking, weak-chinned man.

"You've found it so? Do you play *their* game, then—or your own?"

He looked a little startled. Under her demure manner, was she trying to "get back" at him?

"I find it very hard to get work suited to a gentleman."

She smiled. "What *is* a gentleman?"

"Um. Ah. I thought everybody knew." She was like the majority of the women over here, he told himself, always seeking to trip a fellow up on every word. And then he added, rather shortly: "A gentleman is somebody who's been brought up to have decent manners, and good breeding, and who—er—er—plays the game, you know—and—er—all that sort of thing."

Said Aleda quaintly: "That leaves one rather in the dark, I think. I prefer George Bernard Shaw's definition."

"And what's that?" He was quite nettled now.

Aleda smiled enchantingly, and a little shyly.

"'A gentleman,'" he says, "'is someone who puts *more* into life than he takes *out* of it!'"

"Ha! Ha! She got you there!" From behind the living room curtains came a high, strange chuckling laugh . . .!

CHAPTER VIII

THAT startling, uncanny laugh, coming from behind the curtains! Aleda jumped up, listening and scared . . .

"What is it? Who——?"

The Englishman, Clive Mortimer, blew a nonchalant puff of smoke into the air. He cocked one ear in the direction of the sound, winked reassuringly at Aleda, and said, mockingly, for the benefit of the unseen audience: "It's only a silly little half-wit who's so fascinated by me that she just can't keep away! She's a theatrical soul, and that hyena laugh is her vaudeville act!"

At that, the curtains parted, and into the room rushed a very pretty, very ornate young girl, not more than eighteen years of age.

"Of all the conceited idiots!" She darted towards Clive, snatched the cigarette from his mouth and placed it in her lips. "I love you like a dose of poison, and you know it well!"

"Children, children, stop your quarreling." Behind the new-comer, and carrying a small brown parcel containing the needed oranges, her hat on her head, was Marise. Then, to Aleda: "This is my small sister, the Goldie I told you about. Goldie, meet Miss Ray——"

The younger De Renze swung round on her absurdly high heels and favored Aleda with a cool stare.

"You working in this town?"

"I've got a secretarial job."

"Humph! Not in my line, thanks." Miss Goldie crinkled up her pert little nose.

"You mean, you haven't the brains," corrected Clive. He had taken the oranges from Marise with a murmured word, and now rang the bell for ice and other requisites.

"Ya—ya! *You've* got a right to talk, when you can't earn an honest penny, anywhere." This Goldie was a spitfire. At the moment, with her red hair, she looked like a tawny leopard-cat.

"For the love of Mike, cut out the argument," impatiently demanded her older sister. "Miss Ray will think we're nothing but a lot of savages!"

With a roll of the eyes and an exaggerated shrug of her slim shulders, Miss Goldie indicated that it mattered nought to *her* what anybody thought! She fell upon Clive's gin flask, held it aloft, and said: "I'm holding this to ransom till you pay that $10 debt of yours!"

He flushed. "What do you mean?"

"Don't high-hat me." Goldie tossed a pert, burnished head. She said: "You can't deny Marise lent you $10 last week, with the money she was to give *me* for a new frock. This flask—suppose I hock it—ought to be worth all of that——"

He snatched the flask away from her as the negro maid entered the room. He became very busy, squeezing oranges into the cocktail shaker, adding gin and ice, and shaking vigorously.

Goldie pouted her way to the piano, where Marise had again laid down her pocketbook. "Since your Romeo is so forgetful about paying his debts, I suppose I can help myself to this?" She extracted two five dollar bills.

"I can't spare it. Goldie! Honest, I can't!"

"Ya! Ha! You can spare anything for *him!*" The 18-year-old flung Clive a jealous look. Then, lowering

her voice, and very coaxing: "Oh, Marise, do let me have the money, to get that new frock for tonight. It's reduced to $16.50 since we last saw it—I already have saved $6.50 of my own—maybe *he* (you know who I mean!) will be there? He's such a prince—I want to look lovely—he's only seen me in old rags——"

Marise was yielding with reluctance. It was evident she spoiled this little sister—couldn't refuse her anything.

Clive poured some of the concoction into a glass, said—placatingly—to Goldie: "You try it." Then, to Aleda: "It's the flappers in this city who are the cocktail connoisseurs!"

"Leave her alone, Clive. She's too young—and at this hour——"

But Goldie's sharp elbow pushed the older sister back.

"Come off it! You're talking for the benefit of Miss Simplicity,"—with a wink towards Aleda, and a quick tilting of the glass. "Oh, goofy!" She licked her lips. "A little more gin, you bartender! Would that we had a dash of French vermouth!"

Marise looked vexed. She did not say any more, however, and when Aleda declined, did not press her to participate.

She took a sip or two of the cocktail, took Aleda by the arm, and, with a light: "Dinner's ready. You two follow us," led Aleda downstairs.

The dining-room was in the basement of the house—a long low-ceilinged room. No sunshine penetrated. It was dim and cool.

"Here. You sit here, by me." Marise piloted her guest into a chair near the head of the table—then seated herself. "Tell me about your new job—and everything."

Some of the sparkle seemed to have gone from the older woman's face. Her eyes seemed tired.

"I've got a position as 'substitute' for a secretary in a down-town office while she's away sick." A little pang shot through Aleda at recollection of this morning's meeting with Gary Chester and his failure to recognize her as the girl who had helped him at the time of his accident, up state. "It's from nine to five, and $30 a week."

"That's bully," Marise said. She patted Aleda's hand in friendly fashion. "And where you staying?"

Aleda named the big hotel.

"Four dollars and fifty cents a night is their cheapest! I thought you'd more horse sense than run yourself into that!"

"I'm leaving—right away—I have to look for a place to live——"

Marise hesitated, gave a long glance at Aleda's open, apple-blossom, unsophisticated face. "I like the looks of you. You're square and straight. You'd be a good influence on Goldie, whose gone boy-crazy, and dollar-crazy, and dress-crazy, and who's aiming to hit too hard a pace. Why not pack up your duds and come right here and stay with us? I'd only charge you ten a week, with breakfast and supper included. . . ."

"It's awfully kind of you, but——"

"Aw, come! You want to send money home? That'll leave you with $20 a week for clothes and lunches and so forth, and you can spare a bit of that for the old folks."

"It isn't *enough* to pay you!" Aleda hesitated. She hadn't been particularly attracted to the pert young Goldie —she did not like or trust Clive Mortimer—and she knew little of Marise.

"Money be darned—I've taken a fancy to you," the latter said. Then, wistfully: "It would be grand to have someone like you here, whom I could open my mind and heart to . . . sort of confide in when I get blue

. . . I *do* get low, at times . . . worrying about Goldie, and the future, and the club, and—and things Clive does—he might get in trouble—he's a weak, but awfully good-hearted kind of a chap. He leans on me. I—I'm fond of Clive. I worry over him, you know. And——" —frankly, and looking Aleda in the face—"the $10 would be a help to me. Goldie's extravagant. We're not well-off."

Aleda took decision quickly. She trusted this Marise —was sorry for her. "All right—and thank you for suggesting it. I'll get my trunk and bring it here," she said.

CHAPTER IX

It was gay at Marise's dinner table. The Englishman, Clive Mortimer, and Goldie—fortified by cocktails—were in high mood.

Goldie was going to Princeton, to a baseball game. She had arrayed herself in a striped blue and yellow sweater of a heavy silk, white sports skirt, and white and tan shoes. Down on her reddish curls was drawn a smart blue helmet that her host—a Princeton boy—had bought for her for this occasion. It suited the wearer. It had chic.

"Oh, I'm a gold-digger! If the men crave my company, let 'em pay! Why not?"

Marise shot a dubious glance toward Aleda. How would the quiet young country maid take such remarks?

"I'll borrow your yellow chamois gloves," Goldie addressed her elder sister. She glanced at her small wrist-watch, rose from the table, extracting from a glass jar in the center a yellow tea-rose. She fastened it with a brooch upon one shoulder, peering at her image reflected in a mirror on the wall. "I'll do! I wonder if Freddy Ducane will rise to two orchestra seats for tonight?"

Marise said, sharply: "You mustn't be late again for the cabaret! Not a minute after 11, remember. 'S'matter of fact, you and I ought to rehearse this afternoon."

"Aw! Don't be a kill-joy, sister! Aren't you going

to have one glad and grand romance with your own young man?" She flung a wicked look at Clive, smiled impishly to see Marise redden and the shaft go home. Then, as an imperious honk-honk heralded the presence of her admirers in their racing car, she blew an airy kiss, and flew up and out to the street.

Said Clive: "If that were *my* young sister, I'd give her a good spanking and lock her up!"

"Oh, pshaw! She's only a kid. She works hard enough at night. You let her have her day!" said Marise.

She poured out coffee for the three of them, and in a few minutes Aleda rose.

"You'll want to have your talk. I'll be getting over to the hotel and get packed up——"

"Oh, what's your hurry? Come upstairs and I'll show you your room."

As Marise and she moved towards the door, Clive rose, went to the sideboard, lifted a bottle of whiskey and poured himself a stiff drink.

"I wish he wouldn't!" Marise's eyes were wistful as the pair of them went up the stairs. She leaned a little on Aleda, as though spiritually fatigued as well as physically, and drawing on the girl's strength. "I—I'm mighty fond of Clive. I want to see him develop into a real man—go ahead in his life. If I only had his education——! Gosh!—what wouldn't I do?"

"He's young and strong and—as you say—clever, so why doesn't he go ahead?" Aleda could feel no sympathy for Clive.

"He's too sensitive," defended the other, "and I don't think Clive is as strong as he looks. He was wounded in the war, you know, and then invalided out. He's got a little pension from the British government—sometimes I think it makes him a bit lazy—or 'choosy'—but maybe

that's hard and mean of me, because I'm so energetic myself!"

"Government pension nothing! Clive Mortimer's a big *faker*—and a *remittance* man!" Goldie was dashing through the hall to get her gloves and flung the above barb. "Don't let the big bluff kid you, Marise, you poor boob!"

"Oh, hush!" Then, to Aleda, as they climbed the next flight of stairs to the second floor: "Goldie believes some cat or other who told the child that Clive's people —they're a fine English family—pay him a small, regular income to keep him out of the country and away from his home! But it's untrue! The money IS a government pension for bravery and wounds in the war—I've every faith in Clive!"

It was a faith Aleda could not share. She held her peace, however, which was wise.

The room Marise had allotted to her was small, cozy and bright. Comparatively quiet, too, considering one was really in the Roaring Forties! To the rear of the big, shabby house.

"I can move out the bed, and let you have the divan, as maybe you'll be wanting to entertain company, at times? I don't usually allow it—you know what the Broadway chorines are!—but in *your* case. . . ."

Aleda said stiffly: "It isn't necessary for you to make any change in the room, thanks. I shall have no callers coming upstairs."

Then, at Marise's hasty: "Oh, I didn't mean anything—but we theatrical folks are sort of free and easy, and I thought, being so pretty, you might have a boy friend, and want a little privacy. Goldie's beaux are forever cluttering up the living room——"

"She thinks I am a prude," Aleda told herself. She

gave a nervous little laugh. "I haven't any beaux, nor likely to, but if they ever come, maybe you'll let me put a 'No Admittance' shingle outside the dining room?" She would laugh it off like that, this queer emptiness, this longing at her heart. . . .

Knowing full well that Marise wanted to be alone with Clive, she made the excuse that she had things to do this afternoon, before her packing—and she hurried off. Supper in the West Fortieth Street house was not till seven o'clock. She had several hours to "kill," then . . . on this perfect Spring afternoon.

She crossed seething Broadway at 42nd Street, and lingered before the windows of the fascinating little shops. A smart sports ensemble like Goldie's—how much prettier and more suitably dressed she'd be, in something of that ilk?

This plain little navy suit—how sombre! How dowdy the "serviceable," no-shape hat!

She mustn't let herself be tempted. She dare not spend one nickel of her scanty money. She must get away at once from the fascination of the little shops.

But—as she walked—the tail of her eye drank in the delicate silk lingerie, the ribbons and laces and fal-de-rals dear to all women's hearts. Spring . . . and a lover . . . and Spring finery!

She loved the cobweb hosiery of every color and the slim, high-heeled and buckled shoes. *Some* day . . . oh, surely! . . . when things were a little brighter for the old folks, it wouldn't be wicked and selfish and extravagant of her to spend just a little money on such dainty finery . . .

Aleda reached the big hotel. She walked through the crammed lobby, into the elevator and was shot up like a bullet from a sporting-rifle to her own particular floor.

The clerk at the desk said: "A gentleman has been calling you twice—you're Miss Aleda Ray in 2468—not so?"

Aleda nodded. "Who—who was it?" Her heart fluttered, rose.

"I sent a paper along to your room—oh! here's the carbon!" From the machine beside her desk, the floor-clerk pulled off a crumpled sheet. "Here you are."

Aleda took the memorandum. The name—oh! heavens!—was *Gary Chester!* This morning he had not even recognized her! This afternoon—she stared dumbly at the message—he had twice called her up . . .!

CHAPTER X

THE "Harvest Moon"—that jolly little night club—was waking up to life towards 11 o'clock.

In the West Fifties, built to the rear of a dilapidated garage, and with a most unsavory entrance, the scene hit the eye of the new-comer with all the glitter of Aladdin's Cave.

Because Aleda—clad for the occasion in a chiffon frock Marise had loaned her—had never in her life seen the inside of a night club, she stood on the threshold with Clive Mortimer in a kind of daze.

"Blinking like an owl!" commented Goldie de Renze, acidly, to her older sister. "Why on earth you're putting yourself out by playing fairy godmother to that country rube, is beyond my knowledge! And now you've got her all dolled up in your best pink chiffon, watch her throw the glad eye to your best beau!"

The "beau" was Clive. Annoyed at Goldie's words, Marise yet shot a quick, anxious glance towards the handsome couple who were entering.

Clive *was* impressionable. She knew it. And Aleda was a very pretty, unspoiled sort of girl . . . the type of a girl to appeal to the Englishman's jaded fancy . . .

There were so many of the other kind, right in this town. Gold-diggers, like Goldie (she loved her younger sister—hated to admit it) . . . free-and-easy girls,

who flung their names to right and left . . . girls whose sole idea was a "good time," who never read an interesting book, or had a worth-while thought.

She herself—Marise de Renze—had had no proper education, unless it be from the University of Hard Knocks! A graduate there—with or without honors—she had suffered in her life, and bitterly. Deeply she resented her lost opportunities!

How fresh Aleda looked, how radiant! In the pink gown that she had loaned her, just like a drift of apple blossom! With a contraction of the heart, Marise was thinking: "I looked like that, twenty years ago! She doesn't look a day over eighteen! And Clive sees it, and is attracted by her sweet simplicity. All men, even the rotters, are drawn by unspoiled loveliness—by the flower that hasn't yet been plucked!"

She got up hastily, and in her black-beaded frock—amazingly decollete—crossed the slippery floor.

"Come on in." She grabbed Aleda by the hand, but her eyes were on Clive Mortimer. "You act like a couple of country cousins——"

He caught the sharp note, smiled upon Marise. He lowered his voice to whisper, flatteringly: "I was dazzled by the sight of you, my dear. You're beautiful—like—a—like a black diamond in that frock, tonight!"

"Um! Hard—and glittering—and a fake?" Marise was mollified, however. She led the way to one of the tiny stucco caves that were embedded in the wall.

Aleda was enthralled. "It's fairyland." She stooped her head under the arch and squeezed into the little aperture.

There were other tiny excavations all around the room, each with a glass-topped, and internally-illuminated water-table in which gold fish swam. A lantern up above her

head contained a live canary, hopping on its perch.

And high in the main ceiling of the hall was an electric moon—a "harvest moon"—shedding a quaint blue light to give an ethereal aspect to the scene.

Couples were sitting in the small arched caves. In close proximity. They had a lot of spurious privacy—purely in the imagination—since each "retreat" was as brightly lighted by the canary-lantern and the gold fish tanks as though it were the stage!

"If they want to kiss, they have to do it on the dance-floor, underneath the harvest moon," smiled Marise. "In that dim light, and when the place is crowded, it's much less prominent than the holes-in-the-wall, I'll say!"

Clive, who was sitting at the table with them, carelessly suggested: "Then why not turn out a light or two and sacrifice the gold fish and canaries to the human dickeys and poor-fish-in-love? Why not fling a little blessed darkness into the courting caverns, eh?"

Marise was nettled. "I've got my reputation to maintain. This is a respectable club, not one of your Piccadilly dives or Leicester Squares! Besides, strange as that may seem to such a fascinator as yourself, at least half of the girls come here to show off their dresses and have a good time in the open, with no thought of petting parties or love-making in the dark!"

"Ha! Got you there again!" quoth Goldie who had drifted up to their little cave. She leaned on the glass table, the light from its interior illuminating her elfin, mocking face. "You haven't got a chance, Clive, old dear, against the sharp-tongued wimmens in their thirties! So why not leave—their damn wiles, and give us flappers a chance?"

Clive grinned. He protested: "Miss Ray is still a flapper. And as for Marise, I'd back her—sharp tongue

and everything—against your Sweet Seventeens! Not so, Marise?" He slipped a hand below the table and patted the older woman's knee. "Come on and dance! I want to foot it beneath the harvest moon with my old flame!"

Marise was mollified at once. The Hawaiian orchestra was crooning forth a melody of passion. She arose.

"Dotty about that poor fish, isn't she? It's pitiful to watch——" Miss Goldie was gazing down into the table, where, in the water, a gleaming denizen was feverishly chasing her male. "She's six years older than he, too——"

"You mean, the gold fish?" asked Aleda, mystified, and following her glance.

Miss Goldie giggled. "You are slow. I mean the fish without the gold—Clive Mortimer!"

A magnificent live parrot—his plumage, green and red and yellow—swung arrogantly upon a golden hook. As Clive went by him in the dance, he made as though to take a peck at him. Clive flung away from that sharp beak.

Goldie laughed spitefully and clapped her hands. "'Jamaica' hates him. That bird has better judgment than Marise, I'll say!" She slipped in beside Aleda in the little grotto, and her sharp eyes fixed themselves upon the entrance of the club. "Now, if Marise could only pick a regular fellow, like the one I've got my eye on! He's a real person—a go-getter—and a prince for looks!"

"Who is he?" asked Aleda idly. Her thoughts were on the mysterious phone calls sent to her hotel that day by Gary Chester—he hadn't recognized her in the office—yet, later, he had called her up! Did that imply he was too snobbish to recognize a mere stenographer in her working hours?

CHAPTER XI

GOLDIE and Aleda sat together in the "Harvest Moon" night club, in the tiny grotto-in-the-wall.

Marise, the official hostess of the place, was dancing with Clive Mortimer. Marise was looking radiant and fascinated—and quite young again.

"My sister's a fool—like all unmarried women nearing forty!" Goldie bluntly said. "That Englishman—the 'bally ass,' to use his own expression!—has got her hypnotized. Today she's put the crowning touch to her idiocy, and taken him in as a sort of manager. It makes me so mad!"

"Why so? Maybe he'll—work."

" 'Maybe' is right!" Miss Goldie snorted. "If he'd any capital to put into the 'Harvest Moon,' I'd keep my trap shut! But *has* he? Not on your life! He's got lots of debts, though, I'll be bound! And now that he's come into business with us—(Marise was a fool to agree to such a scheme! but I guess she figured it would give her more chance to keep tabs on him!)—we'll be beautifully involved in his 'no funds' checks and bad accounts!"

Aleda sought to change this distressing subject. "You were telling me about your 'beau ideal' of a young man?"

"Speak plain American!"

She took no notice of Goldie's bad manners, laughed, and said:

"The prince of a good fellow you were just raving about?"

"Oh, him! I don't even know his name, but I've an idea he's a real prince!" Goldie beckoned to a cigarette girl, who was dressed in pink gingham and a sunbonnet, to correspond with the name of the place—(though, indeed, the exotic parrot and gold fish and other gadgets did belie the country title of "Harvest Moon"), helped herself to a packet, said:

"He came here with the Countess Dellamanca, and—though she's beautiful and rich—all the time *I* was dancing he never took his eyes off my face! Then, afterwards, they called me over to their table and she asked me why on earth I didn't go on the stage? He just looked and looked at me, with a 'come hither' in the eye—you know. It made me feel all thrilly. He has the most wonderful eyes—the kind that speak volumes without saying anything. And yet——" Goldie struck a match and lit a cigarette—"I'd swear"—taking a long puff—"I'd swear he isn't a flirt, like most of the men that come here—or sobby, like Clive!"

While she narrated the above, Goldie's sharp gaze was fixed upon the entrance to the club. She proceeded:

"He came a second time—alone—just as I thought he would. I went right over to his table. He was awfully nice to me—charming voice, too—and gentlemanly. Most of the men get so fresh. He didn't. He treated me like—like he would Countess Dellamanca—only more *interested,* sort of!

"He didn't have a flask with him, so I said I'd get him a drink. Marise doesn't like me to do that—she's terrified her darling little 'Harvest Moon' will be extinguished by the cops—*padlocked*—but this fellow turned my offer down. Quite short!"

"He even," Goldie gurgled reminiscently, "read me a lecture! Said he hoped a young girl like me didn't drink! He suggested the Countess might use her influence to get me away from this sort of work—he seemed to think a night club was a wolves' den for this little lamb!—and didn't I think it would be more agreeable for me on the stage?" Goldie laughed outright. "As though chorines don't have their chances to go wrong, as well as cabaret girls!"

"It was kind of him," interpolated Aleda. She thought Goldie a queer little fish. "He sounds—a gentleman——"

Her eyes wandered to the couples on the floor. Marise and Clive. The latter was holding Marise too tightly as they danced. Marise was gazing up into the Englishman's face in a sort of trance . . .

Goldie was rambling on: "The Countess Dellamanca phoned last night to reserve a table for this evening. 'I'm bringing the Prince Gallicorde,' she said. I do believe that's him—my friend! Oh, I'd be frightfully jealous if it weren't that she's married! And with his honorable ideas he'd never think of a woman that's already tied up!"

There was a queer mixture of naiveness and sophistication in this little dancer. A predatory gleam was in her made-up eyes.

Here in this exotically decorated night club, how far away Aleda's old life seemed! Mother and dad—what would they think of the twining, swaying figures?—the overt glances of unattached males towards this table?—Clive?—and Marise, of the rapt eyes?

Said Goldie, all of a sudden, and jumping up: "Marise didn't bring you here to sit dumb, like a bump on a log!" She walked over jauntily to a couple of men who had just entered, and said something, to which the newcomers sheepishly inclined their heads.

Then she brought one of the men over to Aleda. "This is Mr. Smithson. He says he'd like to meet you. Will you dance with him?"

The man was small and pudgy, with little pig's eyes. His scant white lashes twinkled at Aleda. He held out a plump, moist hand, and with a muttered: "Pleasedermeetcher!" assisted her out of the grotto and onto the polished floor.

She was reluctant. Hated to dance with this common-looking stranger of the large paunch. But she was Marise's guest—she must not offend Marise's sister—the two moved off together in the rhythm of the dance.

Like many stout men, her partner moved easily—was extraordinarily light on his feet. The Hawaiian music was enchanting. It seemed to wrap her round in waves of melody. Thinking of romance—of her adventure in the Adirondacks with the attractive Gary Chester who today had telephoned, Aleda closed her eyes.

Goldie, and then Marise, brought other partners to her as the night continued. Aleda would much prefer to sit still, dreaming, in the little cave. But the business-like manner of the hostess, combined with the younger sister's short, sharp ways, compelled Aleda, the visitor, to her feet, again and yet again.

"Do I pay you, or the other girl?" inquired the plump Mr. Smithson at the end of their third dance, when he was about to leave. Then, at her blank gaze (which he misunderstood, thinking she was disappointed at his departure!) he coyly said: "I hate to tear myself away from such a pretty girl, but a fellow must get a little sleep, y'know—and I promised the wife and kids to get up early tomorrow and take 'em for a run in the car——"

With that, he opened his pocketbook and, before she

could prevent him, thrust into Aleda's hand a five dollar bill!

Then he was gone. Aleda, dreadfully humiliated, her cheeks burning, made a quick rush after him with the money. What did he take her for? How dare he—Oh! how dare he do such a thing?

CHAPTER XII

"Don't make a fool of yourself!" hissed Goldie de Renze, as Aleda—the bill clenched in her hand—rushed after the retreating form of Smithson, towards the exit of the club.

"He gave me money! He's insulted me!" Tears blazed in her eyes. Her throat felt tight. She struggled to get past Goldie, who had caught her forcibly by the arm, and was holding her back with the vise-like grip of a young tiger-cat.

"He had a right to give you money! Didn't you dance several times with the man? D'you think Marise and I run this dump for the kick we get out of footing the light fantastic with fat little fathers of a dozen kids, and do it out of philanthropy? Whadda you think this is—a lunatic asylum or an orphanage?"

"You let me go!" Aleda was near sobbing as she struggled with Goldie. "I wouldn't touch his dollars—horrid little man!"

"Then I would. Here—hand them across!" Goldie's lips curved in a hard, predatory line.

A waiter—clad as a harvester—was tittering. A rusic-bonneted waitress drew near. Although an occasional scrimmage was no novelty in the "Harvest Moon," the idea of returning money that a customer had donated to a dancing-partner was unthinkable—a crime!

"Smithson's worth quarter of a million," rapped out the other girl. Aleda still was clinging to the money, edging—despite the struggle—nearer to the hat and coat counter, where Smithson's pudgy form was to be seen.

"I don't care. I wouldn't touch his dollars. He's got to take them back again."

The shrewd one quickly changed her tactics. Diplomacy was needed right away.

"All right. All right. Don't get 'het up' about nothing. You watch me go up to Smithson, and bawl him out, and force him to take his money back!"

Aleda then let her have the money. Goldie was accustomed to these men. She'd have her way. Goldie would spare her the further humiliation of a tete-a-tete with her late partner. The little Broadway girl knew how to handle the insulting male.

She did. In her own manner. And according to her lights. Aleda—the country maid—would have been surprised and most chagrined, could she—seeing Goldie in conversation with Smithson—but have heard the former's "method of attack."

Her back towards Aleda, Goldie—her voice trembling with a mock plaintiveness—looked into Smithson's piggy little eyes and said:

"I'm jealous! Frantically jealous! You've been so busy dancing and flirting with another girl that you haven't given me—the whole evening—either a smile or a look! You know how I counted on your coming—" her voice shook.

The paterfamilias was greatly flattered. Goldie, with her wise cracks and her fiery disposition and her bright locks, was much more to his liking than Aleda—and he said so, adding: "Come on now, you little Redhead, and we'll dance . . ."

This was the last thing Goldie wanted. She could feel Aleda's eyes on her back.

"I'll never dance with you again. I'm through!" (Would this do the trick?)

"Oh, come." According to his tenets, money was the great pacifier. Smithson reluctantly drew out his pocketbook. As he did so, Goldie edged round a bit, so that the movement would be hidden from Aleda. "Daddy says, buy a new hat with this——" —this being a bill for $5—she put her hand out quickly, as though returning him Aleda's money (which already she had slipped surreptitiously into the bosom of her gown)—"and don't say Daddy isn't a big, kind man to jealous little girls!"

"Daddy's a darling," cooed Miss Goldie. She ran past him into the ladies' cloakroom, and counted out the bills.

Ten dollars, including Aleda's money! It had been quickly garnered! She would earn lots more of it, in just that way . . . !

* * * * * *

"Don't say anything to Marise! I've bawled out Smithson!" the little deceiver whispered to Aleda, later that night. "Marise is mighty fond of you, and it would upset her to know you'd been annoyed. Another point is that Smithson is one of our best customers—he thinks nothing of spending $40 or $50 an evening here—and it wouldn't cheer her up particularly to hear that we'd had a sort of an argument with him tonight!"

"You mean—he may not come back again?" Aleda was distressed if, by her action, she had lost her friend a client . . .

"Oh, he'll come back for more—don't worry!" Goldie would have enjoyed "rubbing it in," making the other girl feel the enormity of her crime, but knew it would be

inexpedient. Aleda was just the sort to blab a tale, unwittingly . . . her very unsophistication was dangerous.

And Marise knew her young sister much too thoroughly to believe that Goldie would return money to any man . . . unless such action led to a yet bigger "honorarium."

More couples kept arriving. Waiters placed extra tables round the edge of the floor. Dance space was getting more and more restricted—always the sure sign of popularity in a night club—the dancers, under cover of the "crush," holding more tightly to each other, moving but a foot or two, then swaying together dreamily lost in a dream of rhythmic melody.

"That Hawaiian music gives me a thrill," murmured Goldie, her eyes again fastened on the door. "It'll soon be my dance 'turn,' and if the Prince doesn't show up, I'll weep salt tears on the shoulder of the first good-looking man!"

There was a flutter by the entrance—waiters deferentially standing back—the turning of heads—and a tall, queenly-looking creature in a magnificent brocaded and befurred cloak, swept in.

"The Countess Dellamanca!" breathed Goldie. "There's the Prince behind her—oh, look!—is it—can it be—my man?"

CHAPTER XIII

THE Countess Dellamanca swept into the "Harvest Moon." She was a tall, slim lissom woman, with a beautiful pale face and ash blonde hair. There was a coldness in her regal manner, in the arrogant way she held her small and classic head.

But Goldie's eyes were fixed on the man who followed the Countess into the New York night club. And Goldie's tongue voiced a long, disappointed "O-oh!"

"That isn't my prince, that long skinnymalink!" The man was helping to remove the magnificent, sable-trimmed and brocaded cloak from the shoulders of the Countess Dellamanca. He was nearing fifty, slightly bald and gray. "My young man is years and years younger and a thousand times better looking! Oh, I'm horribly disappointed."

At their entry, Marise had at once stopped dancing and fussed about the newcomers' table, giving the waiters short, staccato orders, sending them running hither and yon.

"That's the Prince Gallicorde with Countess Dellamanca. They say he's madly in love with her," she breathed in an awed fashion a few minutes later to Aleda. "I'm mighty glad they're here. It gives a sort of 'cachet' to the place."

"'Cachet' be darned!" grumbled her younger sister. "I think Dellamanca's a stuck-up cat!"

The Countess, seated in one of the small and quaintly illuminated alcoves, had put her lorgnette to her eyes, and—with a quizzical and amused expression—was looking about the place. She favored Goldie with a patronizing nod.

"Now you run off and change," Marise instructed her sister; "it's nearly time for your act."

She dropped into the vacant seat beside Aleda. She flung an envious look across the room. "Glorious creature, isn't she? See what money does!" she exclaimed. "That cloak alone is worth $3,000. Doesn't it seem unfair how we've all got to work, and the Countess has everything?"

"She's very beautiful," Aleda said.

"Hum. Easy to achieve that, with everything at her disposal—beauty parlors, personal maids, masseuses and all. They say she's had her face lifted. I had a good look just now. She wears her hair drawn off her face in the Grecian style, but I couldn't see any scars. Of course, if you pay enough, they say those plastic surgeons do it very cleverly."

Aleda listened, fascinated. She was a girl who took a vital interest in her fellow creatures. This plunge into New York life was like a dream to the unsophisticated country girl.

She wished Marise would tell her more about the Countess. It sounded like a story in the Sunday papers, didn't it?

As though she read her thoughts, Marise continued: "Had quite a career, the Countess Dellamanca—and yet she's so proud and haughty and well-educated, that no one thinks of her as being notorious—I mean, she's 'received' everywhere. Her name's always in the social columns. She's been married three times. They do say

that at sixteen she ran away from her boarding-school with a fiddler—he played the violin in the orchestra of the local theatre.

"Her people—I don't know who they are—annulled it. She was sent off to Paris—to forget. She studied art, or music, or went to that university they call the Sorbonne, and some years afterwards she came back and fairly queened it with the Park Avenue set.

"Then came her marriage with a wealthy broker of the name of Schumph. Neither his name nor his looks—he was bald and fat and old enough to be her father—came up to her standard—she was forever going off to Europe and leaving him alone for months and months. Then Schumph died. He left her millions.

"When her short widowhood was over—(they say she looked too wonderful in widow's weeds!)—the men were after her like flies. She'd dozens of them at her feet.

"But she was cool and distant to them all. That's enough of a novelty in any woman, these days, to make her stand out from the usual run of females, don't you think? So her career was full of triumphs. And just as people were beginning to say she'd never marry again—she knew too much—she went over to Rome one Winter and the papers announced a great romance with a Count Dellamanca, a handsome Italian of about her own age.

"Italians are quick wooers, and impetuous and right on top of the rumors came the wedding. He was poor and handsome and of noble family. She had millions. On both sides it was a 'catch.'

"That was four years ago, and now she's back—alone—in New York. I don't know whose the fault is—whether he carried on with other women—or whether, because she had the money she was too obstinate. She

looks the bossy sort. Maybe these international marriages don't pay. Italians are high-handed and won't stand being ritzed by their wives. However, I guess there were faults on both sides."

A pause. Marise glanced speculatively at the beauty escorted by Prince Gallicorde.

"My belief is that she came here a second time on the track of the young man Goldie's so crazy about! He was a clean cut American and very attractive—he brought her here once—I expect it isn't anything like so grand as she's been accustomed to—but maybe she heard he came back a second time, without her, and she got jealous, and she thought she'd catch him out!"

Aleda was intrigued, albeit slightly shocked, by all this gossip. She watched the Countess Dellamanca's ice-blue eyes roaming about.

Monday was Aleda's second day of work at the office. It passed very busily and without mishap. Every now and then her thoughts would drift to Gary Chester. . . . Had he learned that she was here? And would he telephone?

At five she was finishing William B. Lingard's letters and cleaning up her desk. The telephone rang. A voice, staccato, feminine: "Will you kindly tell my uncle I will call for him in my car in ten minutes?"

Aleda assented, hung up the receiver, turned to the Spanish-looking stenographer at the next table. "That must be the young woman you spoke of——" —her heart beat rapidly, recollecting how the stenographer had told that Gary Chester had been "tracked" by the boss's niece.

"Oh, her!" The girl was busy finishing her work and said no more. But, a few minutes later, when a tall,

queen-like blonde sailed through the outer office to the inner room, she nudged Aleda, whispering: "There she goes—the firm's high-hat, titled relative!"

Aleda blinked. Her breath caught. She stared after the retreating figure. William B. Lingard's niece—Aleda at once recognized her—was none other than the Countess Dellamanca!

CHAPTER XIV

ALEDA—packed like a sardine in its can—was in the suffocating subway, bound for 42nd Street. Humans were all about her, pressing at every point. Her thoughts pressed, too, just as uncomfortably as did her fellow-toilers in this great, rushing, rattling train that darted like an angry monster through rocky caverns, shooting blue flame!

Was life really worth the struggle? With difficulty Aleda turned her head, surveying the multitude of passengers.

How tired they looked, after the day's effort! How wretchedly hot they seemed, on this warm evening of June!

At this very moment, wasn't the lovely Countess Dellamanca above ground, luxuriously riding in her cool limousine?

So she was William B. Lingard's niece—his dead sister's daughter!

She was the vampire of whom the stenographer had spoken, who planned to go right across Europe on Gary Chester's track!

The Countess had beauty, wealth, position. It seemed to Aleda—weary from her typewriting, and the unaccustomed confinement of an office—that the Dellamanca siren had everything!

For HER to dream of Gary Chester, then, was sheer presumption! Oh, nothing but a joke!

He had not even recognized her in the office. No doubt some of the Dellamanca snobbishness was his!

But he had telephoned the hotel on Saturday! Was it that he didn't wish to acknowledge his acquaintanceship with her in public but was quite willing to have a private word with her on the line? Or a sub-rosa flirtation where no one could see them?

A certain type of man did act like that, she knew. Had two kinds of women in his life. The sort one brought to meet one's family and would be willing to have as a wife. Then—she flushed hotly at the insult of it—there was the type of girl one didn't recognize when meeting her in public or at her job, but privately called up.

The vision of the Countess's lovely, mocking face rose up before her in the dizzily swaying train. (This lack of air! It made Aleda smother. . . .)

Oh, how foolish she'd been to think so much of Gary Chester! What could she ever be in the young man's life? "Ships that passed in the night——"

Had he telephoned again? She had carefully given the hotel, on leaving it, Marise's number. If anybody wanted her, they were to ring there. Both Saturday and Sunday had passed without further attempt on his part to talk with her. It was unlikely, she told herself, that he would call her up again.

Yet, at 42nd Street she found herself emerging from the jammed subway and walking blocks out of her way to the hotel where she had stayed and up to the information desk. Had there been any messages since Saturday? Her heart rose.

No, nothing! With shamed cheeks Aleda hurried off.

"Fool that you are! As though he'd ever look at you!" she apostrophized herself.

She walked blindly towards Fifth Avenue in the opposite direction to Marise's house. When the lights changed from red to green in the high bronze towers, she went with the surging crowds across the street.

A lumbering green omnibus marked "Riverside" came to a halt. Aleda scrambled up the stairs and got a seat on top.

Air! Breezes! Spaciousness! And solitude! She wanted that.

The vehicle skimmed up the avenue at heartening speed. And all about her in the little seats were couples, for the top of a Fifth Avenue bus on a Spring evening is New York's municipal courting ground!

It made her feel solitary.

"Don't be a sentimental goose!" she told herself.

Work must be the keynote of her life, in this big heedless town. After office hours, instead of idling, she would get copying to do at home—would buy a typewriter for herself on the installment plan.

In that way, and by self-denial and concentration, she would earn extra money to send to the old folks. . . .

The bus swung through the traffic of 72nd and Broadway and turned into the famous Drive. Below was the gleaming river and the tall masts of ships. The vista of water leading to the wide Atlantic made Aleda see visions and dream dreams. . . .

Europe! The wonderful cities thereof—London, Paris, Vienna, Monte Carlo, Rome!

Rome—the "Eternal City!" Was Count Dellamanca, the husband of the siren, waiting for his Countess there? She was legally tied up to him—there was no divorce in

Catholic Italy—pursue him as she would, the Countess could never be Gary Chester's wife . . .

On this warm June evening, on the roof of the big omnibus, she gazed down the Hudson, dreaming her dreams!

Three days elapsed. Extraordinarily busy days for Aleda. William B. Lingard was a worker. He kept his employes on the run.

At nights the country girl was tired, but she slept badly in the none too quiet atmosphere of Marise's home.

And promptly at nine she was on the job, and tackled it successfully. On her fifth day at the office William B. Lingard gave her a word of praise.

That heartened her. She had her niche here in the whirling world of business, however humble. She would make a still greater success of it.

On the sixth day—it was Friday—she got into the elevator about six o'clock. She had left William B. Lingard closeted in his inner office in a belated conference. There was no one in the lift except the boy in charge of it when she got in.

"Hi! Wait a minute!" Steps came hurrying down the passage, and Gary Chester—yes, it was he!—stepped into the car. He took his hat off as the car shot downwards, gave Aleda an interested, half-puzzled glance.

She took her courage in both hands, obeying a primitive impulse. The warm color sweeping over her face, she said in a shaky little voice, breath almost choking her: "You're Mr. Chester, I think? You telephoned—on Saturday? Don't . . . don't you remember me?"

CHAPTER XV

FACING each other in the elevator that was shooting downwards in the building where William B. Lingard had his offices were Gary Chester and Aleda Ray.

"Don't you remember me?" She had taken her courage in both hands and addressed the tall, good-looking Gary. Her heart throbbed in her throat.

His face lit up expectantly. Could it be she? Oh, strange coincidence! He had seen her a week ago in this building, and at the time had thought there was a strange familiarity about that apple-blossom face. . . .

But where he'd seen it before he hadn't the least recollection!

Now into his brain flashed a vision of green meadows, dappled sunshine and a scent of clover in the air.

"I'm the girl who tied up your head when you had the motor-accident at Indian Lake."

"My Good Samaritan!" He put a big, strong hand out, gripping hers tight and giving it a hearty shake. His teeth showed in a flash of white. Those handsome eyes of his were shining. "This is a great piece of luck! I've been trying to get in touch with you to thank you for what you did! You were wonderful!" He drew a quick breath.

"You called me at the hotel?" She was trembling with suppressed excitement. Her voice seemed to come from far off.

"Yes. Several times. My friend, the country doctor, gave me your name and the news that you were off to New York. I made him get your address, too. He dropped in to see your father and mother—they told him what hotel you were at, and he sent word on to me."

He was eager as a boy, and smiling. He continued: "I called up several times. You were out, and afterwards they said you'd gone from the hotel and left no address. I was awfully disappointed—indeed, I wrote a letter to your home a couple of days back!"

Her heart sang with joy. She said: "I did leave my address at the hotel. They ought to have given it to you. And your letter hasn't been forwarded to me yet."

The elevator had reached the main floor. The attendant clanged the gates back. Aleda, followed by her new-found friend, stepped out.

"You know, I had an infernal jolt at the time of the smash—the doctor said it was concussion, though I soon got over it. But I don't remember a single thing that happened." He had put a piloting hand below Aleda's elbow, as though afraid that in the crowded lobby she would get away from him. "I woke up in my bed at the inn with a dickens of a headache, and I haven't the least notion what had occurred! But when you spoke just now, it sort of comes back to me vaguely—green meadows and a tinkling little stream, and me lying on the grass with my head on a beautiful girl's lap."

She laughed gently. She was full of a bright exuberance. The young man looked at her, noting her sweet, wistful grace. He thought: "She's pretty as a picture, and so shy! Not many are that way, these days . . ."

And she was saying to herself: "He's even handsomer than I thought! Is this dreadfully unconventional? Why do I feel so happy?"

They were at the exit of the building now. Would he bid her goodbye?

He said, in his well-bred, charming voice: "Please don't think it bold of me, but it would give me such pleasure if you would dine with me tonight."

"Oh, no. I—my friends are expecting me for supper." She was all confusion.

He drew her to one side of the steps leading to the street. "I don't want to be a nuisance, but I expect to be going abroad pretty soon, and fate might not be kind enough to give me another chance." He smiled disarmingly. "That talisman you sent has brought me such a lot of luck already that maybe I'm greedy. But I should love to have even a half hour of your company!"

She hesitated. She looked up at him, her cheeks shyly flushed.

He had a gay and happy air about him, and something kindly in his bearing. Tall and well-built, she noted the fine lines of his chiselled face, so lean and brown, the cleanly sculptured chin and sensitive mouth.

"There would be nothing wrong if we dropped in for a few minutes to the restaurant next door and had a cup of tea or a soda?" A quizzical, half-pleading, half-comical look was in his eyes. "Do say 'yes.' You took me under your protection once. Couldn't you do it, just for a little while, a second time?"

She yielded. He piloted her through the swinging doors of a popular tea room, and to a corner table. He ordered tea and French pastries. Here, close beside him, she noticed how the hair grew back from his broad and clever forehead in dark waves of brown. She had once pressed her lips against that hair . . . she flushed hotly at the recollection . . . here in New York how far away that moment in the Adirondacks seemed!

Did he remember? But of course not! He had had concussion . . . everything connected with that quaint, semi-tragic meeting had faded from his mind.

And yet—wasn't he looking at her with a kindly warmth in his eyes? She wasn't to him a mere shadow . . . he had been interested enough to try and get in touch with her.

A waitress brought the tea and cakes. Aleda poured. Her hand shook a little. She hoped that Gary Chester would not notice her embarrassment.

"This is awfully cosy." He took his cup from her. He helped her to a French pastry, picked one for himself, tackling it with the appetite of a schoolboy. He said, sparks glinting in those handsome eyes of his:

"There's a question in my mind. Will you promise to answer it?"

CHAPTER XVI

ALEDA sat at the little corner in the restaurant with Gary Chester.

The miracle had happened. They had met again.

Outside the homebound workers were pouring out from the great skyscrapers. They surged along the sidewalks of Wall Street, overflowing into the street.

But here there was a peacefulness and isolation. It brought Aleda close to Gary Chester. She caught the warm and interested look in his gray eyes, fixed on her face. Her heart rose.

"Will you promise to answer my question?" he was repeating. His teeth were very white and even. His voice—Aleda thought—particularly well bred.

She must not let him see she was excited. To display perturbation was a sure way to decrease a man's interest, so she'd read! Oh, for a little worldly wisdom in the handling of the male!

"You ask too much." She smiled bewitchingly into the handsome, pleading eyes. "To promise anything without knowing what's coming would be absurd!"

"Then here goes. I'll risk it." He drew a quick breath. Everything about this young man seemed alert and vital. "Are you going to turn me down because we weren't conventionally introduced to one another?"

She poured herself a second cup of tea, added lemon

and sugar, sipped the beverage, and then—not looking at him—said:

"On both occasions of our meeting, I was the one who came forward first——"

He leaned towards her. The gray eyes were filled with eagerness. "That's beside the question. Please give me a reply."

Aleda shrugged coquettishly. Her nervousness was going from her. "Do you really mind so much?"

"You know I do. I like you. I liked the frank way you spoke to me in the elevator just now. I even liked your hesitation in coming in here—though I'd have been disappointed had you refused, you understand. And I'm awfully indebted for what you did for me, up state!"

"For leaving my car blocking the road so that you had an accident?" she counter-thrust. Her mind seized on his comment on her "hesitation." She told herself, blushing: "Girls have never refused him anything. Just because I didn't leap at his invitation is a perfect novelty for him!"

She would, she must, be difficult. This was a real man. He would never value anything that was "cheap."

He smiled, his teeth a flash of white. He said: "All's well that ends well. But don't let us write the word 'finis' to this meeting. Let's make it the beginning."

Her heart beat suffocatingly. He really, then, was "interested." Didn't want to lose sight of her, a second time.

She said, in a forced, blithe tone: "You must know so many much more amusing girls than I——"

"Why so? I'm no Don Juan."

A thought—devastating—pierced her. Was he a married man?

She trembled. If that were so the dream must perish, and the romance die . . .

She murmured: "I heard—you said—you were going on a trip to Europe."

"Yes," he nodded. "Within a few weeks."

So soon? Her heart contracted.

Her thoughts flashed back to his accident in the Adirondacks. "You know the Austrian Tyrol, I think?"

"Yes." His eyes were lighted. "I've had some glorious holidays in that part of the world." Then, curiously: "However did you guess?"

"Ha! Ha!" She shook a gay forefinger at him. "Maybe I heard about your doings. Maybe——" greatly daring—"I heard someone tell of the glories of Spring in the Austrian Tyrol—and a beautiful maid."

A wave of red—to her astonishment—came up beneath his tan. He laughed uncertainly, as though a little put out. Was he remembering how he had lain, after the accident, with his head in her lap? Did he know he had spoken words like those? Or (a foolish little pang came at the thought of it!) was there really some woman—a sweetheart or a wife—in whose company those holidays in the Tyrol were spent?

"Tell me about yourself." He changed the subject. He leaned back in his chair, got out his case and offered her a cigarette.

She shook her head. "I'm old-fashioned. I don't smoke. And I haven't any story to relate."

He grinned. "I like old-fashioned girls. They're so —exceptional. And as for having nothing to tell about yourself, you're mighty lucky."

"Why?"

"Isn't there a proverb that 'the happiest women have no histories'?"

They both laughed at that. And soon the pair of them were talking like old friends.

* * * * * *

"Package just come for you by messenger, miss." Into Marise's dining room that evening came the colored maid. She handed Aleda a small box.

"But I didn't order anything——"

"Open it. Maybe it's a present?" suggested Marise.

Aleda undid the wrappings, drew from the tissue paper a handsome pair of dark blue gauntlet gloves.

"Whoops, dearie! Real French kids! Must have cost at least $10!" exclaimed Marise. "Look for a card——"

But there was nothing. The package bore, in an unknown hand, the name of Aleda Ray, and the address—and that was all.

"Got a millionaire admirer, what? Who is he?" Miss Goldie condescended to inquire.

"I don't know——"

"Snap out of it! You've been kissing some fellow while he was asleep—and the gloves are the forfeit——"

Aleda cried indignantly: "I never did such a thing in my life——" then crimsoned hotly. Hadn't she once pressed her lips to an unconscious "someone's" hair?

CHAPTER XVII

Goldie de Renze stood before the mirror in the third floor back bedroom of Marise's house.

Her air was discontented. Face pale from last night's party, which hilariously had endured into the dawn. Lips drooping peevishly at the corners. Eyes sunken and drawn.

"God! I look older than Marise!" She grabbed savagely for an ancient rabbit's foot, daubing her cheeks with rouge. The bright color seemed to make the tiredness and the lines show more distinctly. She flung the offending beautifier right across the room, and with a groan sank on the tousled bed.

Her temples throbbed. There was a shooting pain from the back to the front of her head. Her neck ached, too, from sleeping in the wrong position. Although a filter of sun shone into the room, before her eyes danced dizzy black spots.

She put a clammy hand to her forehead. Where, in heaven's name, was the bottle of bromo seltzer?

Hadn't she called for Marise several times, and no one answered? It was just like Marise, when wanted, to be not at hand . . .

Or maybe Marise was still angry at her for going, against her wishes, on an "into-the-dawn" party with the high-stepping crowd.

Who cared, anyway? Wasn't she Goldie de Renze—

nearly nineteen, and old enough to take care of herself.

Weren't there even younger girls who did much better for themselves, and were a whole lot more heedless about treading the "straight and narrow" path? After all, what did one get by being goody-goody? Marise held up Aleda as a bright example, but catch her—Goldie—shutting herself up from nine to five in a beastly office, slaving at an old typewriter and wasting her young life!

Not she! She'd earn money fifty times as quick as that, and with less effort. Pretty young girls who slaved themselves to death were fools.

"Gosh! Isn't Francine lucky?" Goldie apostrophized the ceiling, lying flat on her back. "What wouldn't I give to be in her shoes!"

Francine—a hard-boiled, clever little gold-digger—had been a shining member of the party of a few hours back. Indeed, a wealthy man had given the affair in honor of Miss Francine. Tucked into the supper-napkin of each "lady" had been a present—and a magnificent diamond bracelet, far outshining the other gifts, had fallen to Francine!

A yachting cruise in the Mediterranean was to follow on that present. Quite green with envy were the other girls!

"It's a professional engagement," airily announced the favored one, who was a dancer. "Chubby——" ("Chubby" was the host)—"has got a boatload of guests boarding his private yacht at Nice. I'm to be a sort of entertainer—teach the fat fellows the latest dance steps—chaperone the ladies"—here Francine winked upon the company—"go ashore to the casinos with Chubby and his pals, to keep an eye upon their pocketbooks and save them from losing their last cent, gambling——"

There had been ribald roars at that.

"Don't let her kid you along, Chubby!"

"Set a thief to catch a thief!"

"Francine'll gold-dig your last nickel!"

The young woman—she was only seventeen—had stoically maintained her front. "Sheath your claws, girls, and your jealousy, and quit being cats. While you're all grilling in New York, picture me with the millionaires on the 'Gigantic'—Chubby's booked me a first-class passage crossing the Atlantic! Then comes a week in Paris, to get new clothes! Then the 'blue train' for Nice—and then the yacht. I'm to have my own suite, Chubby says! We'll visit Monte Carlo and Mentone and Cannes.

"Then Naples and Capri, and—if it isn't too hot—float on maybe into the Near East. If I haven't grabbed off a millionaire by then, Chubby 'ull get me a dancing engagement at Deauville, he says, for August, which is the season, followed by another job at Biarritz."

With a fierce envy, Goldie had hearkened to the recital.

"I'm better looking than Francine. Why can't I be as lucky?" To drown her jealousy at the other's fortune, she had drunk to excess.

Hence this morning's frightful headache . . .

Down in the lobby, the phone bell rang sharply.

Lying on the tousled bed in her faded kimono, the insistent ting-a-ling went, just like stabbing knives, through Goldie's head.

"Good lord! Why doesn't somebody answer it? Is everybody in this house dead?"

She buried her aching head beneath the bed-clothes, but the sound penetrated even there.

With a mutter she sprang up, wrapping her kimono closer round her slim body and thrusting her feet into shabby mules.

As she clip-clopped down the uncarpeted stairs, she

hoped it might be a message from some rich admirer, even though she'd failed to make any new "hit" last night . . .

To her chagrin the voice that trickled across the wire was only that of Clive Mortimer, her "bete noir," the Englishman!

"Marise is out. Whadda ya mean by calling up at this hour? I was in bed!" she snapped.

"Ah, ha! The palace of the sleeping beauty?" Clive's tones were unusually suave.

"This dump's no palace," she rapped back. "It's nothing but a morgue!"

"Oh, come! I'll be over in ten minutes. I've a little proposition that is going to make things simply hum for you!" said Clive.

CHAPTER XVIII

In the front parlor of the shabby, comfortable house on West Fortieth Street Goldie de Renze faced Clive.

"Why all the mystery? What's the big idea? Spit it out!" inelegantly quoth she.

A glint of sunshine shone athwart the weak and handsome features of the Englishman. For the first time, Goldie noticed how near-set and how crafty were those eyes of his—"like the color of a dead codfish that's been lying a week on the beach!" she told herself.

"You want to make money, don't you?" His tones were silky smooth. Those ultra-English accents riled the girl.

"Come off it! You know darned well I'm sick and tired of being poor! I was just thinking of kicking the traces altogether, like some of the girls I know! Men don't appreciate workers! They only take notice of the other kind, who've got horse sense enough to 'work' them to the last penny, and get away with it!"

"Ah! don't be a cynic!"

Goldie glowered at the man.

"You think I'm not educated, like *you* are, and so you fire off those high-hat words! But some day—*soon*—you and Marise and that stuck-up Aleda will find out that I'm no dumb-bell!"

He said, placatingly: "It's because I *do* know it that I'm here, waiting to trot out my little plan!"

"Go on, then! Shoot!" She sank back in a rocker, closed her eyes.

He lowered his voice. He touched her on the shoulder. "I don't want anyone to overhear. Will you come out with me?"

She blinked up at him, astonished. "Trying to vamp me, huh? The blooming plot thickens!" She mimicked the refined, clipped tones.

Clive Mortimer kept his temper with this irritating girl.

"Get on your hat and come round to Vanzetti's for lunch. I'll stand you a bottle of red wine."

"Criminee! Have you inherited a fortune? And all the time I thought you were only a 'remittance' man!" Her drawl was mocking and antagonistic.

He reddened, shrugged his shoulders, half turned on his heel, as though to depart.

"If you feel that way, there's nothing more to be said. I know one or two others who'd jump at the chance I was going to offer you——"

Goldie rose to her feet. "Hold on! Don't get all het up about nothing! I know I'm a bear with a sore head. And speaking of animals"—she laughed apologetically—" 'a hair of the dog' that bit me last night—otherwise a pick-me-up—is what I need! So I'll go to Vanzetti's with you, and if I can have a cocktail, you can fire away!"

The pair went off together through the sunlit street.

Two blocks away they descended a small flight of steps and Clive pressed a button—four times in succession—at the side of a wrought-iron door.

A pair of black eyes surveyed them through the grating. Clive gave the password in Italian. The door opened. A suave gentleman from the Mediterranean bowed and smiled ingratiatingly. They traversed a stone corridor, then through a steamy kitchen, and found themselves in

a glass-roofed restaurant that looked like a conservatory.

Clive led Goldie to a remote table. It had a trellis-work of ivy back of it and was flanked by a high screen.

He picked up a menu. He read aloud the names of Italian dishes, tentatively.

Goldie shuddered. "The very sound of 'em makes me sick! Order me a cocktail—quick—a double one! And then a bottle of red wine!"

When they were both sipping together, and the strong stimulant reviving her, forgetful of Clive's "proposition," she was soon expatiating on the glories of last night.

"If I could only get hold of rich men's money, like Francine——!"

Clive's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the pretty, discontented, predatory little face.

"Why don't you use your wits, then, Goldie? Why don't you capitalize your knowledge of the male?"

"You talk so big——" But a little flush of interest crept into the cheeks, whose pallor previously had showed below the rouge. "You really think I understand men, huh?"

"You know their weaknesses. And isn't this city full of men with more money than brains? Isn't it full of bored husbands and of suspicious wives?"

Over her cocktail, the girl's green eyes were fixed upon his face. He went on, suavely:

"Think of the number of lonesome men with cash to burn who float into this town. They'd be glad of introductions to amusing, pretty girls like yourself, Goldie! You couldn't handle them all! And here's where you could use your girl friends——"

"Good lord! Are you suggesting I should run a matrimonial agency? Go easy, Clive!" She was between laughter and annoyance.

He put his empty glass upon the table. He said, deliberately:

"I shouldn't call it that. You could execute a lot of tactful commissions without asking questions, and make a fine rake-off."

"Ha! Sort of meeting place for gold-diggers? Pushing the flies into the spider's web, or what?"

He looked at her. There was a very crafty gleam in his light eyes. They narrowed as he said: "You'd be running a sort of agency for general information, and money would pour in on you in all sorts of ways. I shouldn't be so inartistic as to speak of spiders' webs—I'd rather say that the threads of a whole lot of plots and secret romances would be running through your fingers, Goldie! If you handled this thing right, you'd make a fortune—cheering up bored husbands, keeping tabs on men with more money than brains, and maybe now and again helping out the suspicious wives!"

With a horrified gasp, Goldie breathed the word: "Blackmail!"

CHAPTER XIX

"BLACKMAIL!" Goldie slumped low in her seat in the Italian restaurant. Her eyes shot indignant sparks at Clive.

"Don't be a silly child! And, for God's sake, lower your voice!" He whispered, and ordered a second cocktail. "I brought you here for privacy. And now, not only do you misrepresent what I say, but you shout it at the top of your voice!"

"You startled me so!"

"But you needn't let the world into our private affairs!"

The possessive pronoun made the girl's thoughts swing to Marise. Her older sister was Clive's confidante and friend—not she! Why, then, this rendezvous?

"Haven't you talked your bright idea over with Marise? Did she give you the cold shoulder, that you come to me?"

He hesitated. He was in the elder girl's debt to a far greater extent that Goldie realized. He didn't want to quarrel with his bread and butter. Would it be expedient to be perfectly frank with this pert Miss?

"When our plans are properly developed will be soon enough to tell your sister." That was non-committal.

"Hum. Marise is too honest, you mean? And you think I'm the crooked one?"

This was unpromising.

"If you're going to talk that way, all bets are off!"

A waiter came with the second round of cocktails.

Goldie, unnerved, and not herself today, drained the glass.

Ah! that was better! Gone was her headache and her lassitude. She felt a sudden sense of gaiety . . . of hovering on the brink of an adventure. . . . She wouldn't snub him any more . . . she'd draw out Clive!

"Trot out the big ideas to your little friend! You can trust me to keep 'em dark until you give the high-sign!"

Clive hesitated. Marise would certainly put her foot upon his scheme. He must secure Goldie's silence by different tactics.

"We don't want to hurt Marise's feelings. It would be a little hard to explain to her that a young and very pretty girl—like yourself, my dear——" —over his glass he bowed to Goldie—"is essential for this job. Your sister's all right as a night club hostess. But she hasn't—(fond as I am of Marise, I'm speaking plain business!)—she hasn't got the youth or drawing power for this line of work."

Hawk-like, he watched the effect of his remarks on Goldie. The girl smiled amiably. She was flattered.

"And Marise hasn't got your wide circle of girl friends," he added. "That's very important."

A waiter came for orders. "Unless you eat something, I shan't let you have the wine," said Clive. Goldie gave in. "I'll try to tackle something." She made a pert face.

When the food was placed before them, and the girl toying with it, Clive unfolded his plan.

"You want to make a lot of money quickly? Well, here's how!"

Goldie must start a little flower shop just off Broadway, he said. The flowers would be the apparent reason of the venture—a sort of "blind," and at the same time a lure for clients (since gentlemen liked to adorn their

lady friends with bouquets) but the more profitable source of income would be the private postoffice at the back of the shop!

"A private postoffice?" repeated Goldie her eyes wide.

Clive nodded. "You'd rent out little locked boxes to your customers. They'd call for letters at your shop that they wouldn't want to have delivered to their homes or offices, see?"

"Um! Ah! You mean, love letters?" A glint of comprehension and excitement came into the green eyes.

"Not necessarily. A man might be conducting a second business under a different name——"

"Leading the double life, you mean?"

Clive shrugged his shoulders. This young girl's bluntness was annoying. She would call a spade a spade!

He'd have to cure her of that crudeness, if she was going to run this business at his instigation, and on his behalf!

"What does it matter whether the locked boxes contain love letters or business letters, so long as you are well paid?"

Goldie was flushed and eager now. "But how would we get our—what did you call 'em—clients? What would be the bait that would lure 'em into the shop?"

He smiled ingratiatingly.

"Yourself, for one. What could be more attractive than a beautiful girl set in a bower of flowers? And all your girl friends would be dropping in to see you—you know lots of Broadway beauties who'd be a great attraction for the men!" His eyes narrowed craftily.

They were fixed, in python fashion, on the pretty, greedy little face. "You would make it a point, indeed to let them know——" this was a delicate moment, he must tread warily—"it would get about in the right quar-

ter that the most attractive girls in the city were in and out of 'Marigold's Flower Shoppe.' "

"Marigold?" She was all excitement.

"Yes. Nice, simple name. You wouldn't want the name of Goldie de Renze in it. She belongs to the Harvest Moon Club and the cabarets."

"But I could get customers through the Harvest Moon. We might almost make a—whadda ya call it?—amalgamation?"

To that Clive gave a negative. "Too soon. This venture must be kept mighty private. Right at the beginning, not even Marise is to know. You understand?"

"But the capital? Where will it come from?"

Clive said: "I've made an arrangement with a Greek. He'll let you have the flowers on a commission basis. The premises are already his. It was one of his smaller flower shops, but it proved to be a flop."

"Then why—if I take it on——"

Clive cleared his throat impatiently. "The flowers will only be a minor issue, don't you understand? You'll have the private postoffice that'll be worth thousands to you, not to speak of the introductions on which you—er—we—will get our commission——"

"A gold-diggers' rendezvous?" interpolated Goldie. This time, the cocktails and the wine were working potently. She was not longer horrified.

"Don't call it silly names," admonished Clive. "You'll be a sort of go-between for folks—forward phone messages and mail—and incidentally learn lots of useful secrets and make lots of money!"

There was no guardian angel there to tell the girl (although Clive knew it) that the "private postoffice" is utterly against the law!

CHAPTER XX

ALEDA—her heart singing with happiness—awoke to a new day in the little sunlit bedroom of Marise's house.

There, on the dressing table, wrapped in tissue paper, lay the handsome pair of gloves. On the previous night they had arrived mysteriously. The package had contained no card or message.

But that the gift had come from Gary Chester, the recipient was certain!

"You've been kissing some man, and this is the forfeit!" Goldie had crudely cried out.

Into Aleda's mind had swept the recollection of that kiss, up state! So Gary—despite the concussion following on the accident—had remembered?

This was his way of showing his remembrance—and appreciation! The fact that no card had been included with the gift displayed his delicacy!

"He's sensitive, like I am!" Before Aleda's mind stretched glittering peaks of joy. Between herself and this attractive Gary was a "something," drawing them mutually to each other. It was not for nothing, that quaint and thrilling meeting in the Adirondacks! And hadn't Fate now thrown them together a second time?

Last night he had asked her for her address, on parting with her. It must have been his plan then to buy the gloves! He wanted her to think about that kiss . . . given far away . . . given by a sudden impulse that

she thought was pity, but now knew was something deeper . . . how she had been drawn irresistibly to that pale, unconscious face!

"He's the handsomest man I've ever seen! He's far and away the most attractive!" She lay back on the pillows for a luxurious moment, flinging both arms above her head, and stretching blissfully.

Aleda had known few men in her young life. Up in the mountains—even with her daily trips in the car to the nearest town for her shorthand lessons—there had been few social contacts, and existence had run quietly, with no great thrills, and at the same time no great sorrows, or indeed any excessive emotions, to make high lights on her life.

Then, as though dropped from the blue skies above her lake, had come the stranger! She'd held his unconscious body—slim and straight, like an Apollo—in her arms, had pressed her lips in overwhelming pity on his blood-stained forehead!

And in the dim regions where his mind was wandering, he had registered that kiss!

A thrill shot through her heart at memory of it.

"He was 'sent' to me. There was a purpose in our meeting. Right from the first moment I felt—oh, as I've never felt before!"

Today, on this sunny, early Summer morning when the world was fresh and sparkling, would she see him again? Would he come into William B. Lingard's office on some pretext, just to have one look at her? Or would he telephone?

Aleda rose, went to the window, flung it up higher, and put her curly head out for a breath of air.

Life was intoxicating. Full of heavenly possibilities.

No longer was New York lonely. Never again would she be foolishly afraid.

She lingered, listening to the gay noises of the city. Yes, they were gay today—not strident! Wasn't even the roar of the Elevated like a friendly voice?

Her thoughts were flushed with happiness. They sprang from sunlit peak to peak of joy. They leapt down long vistas of meetings with Gary Chester—listened to imagined whispers that were as the music of the spheres to her.

This loving! Here in the shabby little bedroom of Marise's house in the West Forties, love beat about Aleda like the spiced odor of a thousand poppies, drugging the soul, and setting her heart afire.

"But this will never do!" She flung delicious thoughts away from her, glanced at her watch that lay beside the gloves upon her bureau, gave a startled: "O-oh! I'll have to rush!" and with a buoyant swiftness bathed and dressed.

She donned a crisp little waist with a frilly collar. Her dark blue suit was neatly pressed. Down on her curly head she drew the small blue hat that had seemed so plain and prim, but today was adjusted to a coquettish angle. She fluffed her hair above each ear, bringing it forward so that it made her eyes more shadowy.

She dabbed a fluff of powder on her pretty, rounded cheeks, her nose and chin. (Aleda's apple-blossom skin required no touch of color.)

Then, catching up the gauntlet gloves—(she'd wear them, even though they were too good for daily use, because she was certain she would see the donor!)—Aleda ran downstairs for breakfast to the dining-room.

The table wasn't set. Marise called from the kitchen:

"That good-for-nothing maid hasn't shown up yet! Come on in here! I'm making the coffee!"

Meals—especially in the morning—were apt to be sketchy and uncertain in Marise's house. But Aleda's thoughts were not upon her appetite. She sat on the edge of the kitchen table, a dainty, sprightly figure, eating a sugared bun, and sipping the hot liquid. She listened to Marise's complaints with outward sympathy, but the doleful recital could find no reflection on her own happy face.

"It seems as though everything in life went against me!" said Marise. Even in the artificial light of the basement, her skin looked tired and yellow. There were shadows all about her eyes. She added, looking enviously at Aleda: "My! but you're young—and fresh as paint!"

Aleda laughed softly, glanced at her wristwatch, whistled. "Gee! I must run, or I'll be getting the air from William B. Lingard——"

"From whom? What's that? What did you say?" Marise rapped out the words like pistol shots. Her eyes were staring. Her hand that held the cup shook violently, so that some of the coffee spilled upon the table. Aleda saw that her unrouged lips had suddenly gone white. "Did—did you say—Lingard . . . Wall Street . . . a word."

"Why, yes! I thought I'd told you? My boss is William B. Lingard . . . Wall Street . . . a financier. Do you know him?" Aleda was startled at Marise's fixed start, the sudden tension of her body.

"Know him? Good God! Is he—is he—about 48 years of age? Handsome . . . with a Roman nose . . . and a jutting chin . . . a—a sort of eagle face?"

"Fits him exactly!" exclaimed Aleda! "What—what is it, Marise?" She was concerned at the other's sudden pallor and queer air. "You've met him, you say?"

Marise's cup slipped from her nerveless fingers with a clatter. Her lips opened and shut helplessly. She gave a tiny moan as her head fell sideways and she slipped to the floor.

CHAPTER XXI

"MARISE! What is it? Oh, Marise!" Aleda rushed to the recumbent figure. Her heart was thudding. Marise had fainted!

"Marise! I'm here! It's Aleda!" She knelt on the kitchen floor, caught Marise's icy hand. She felt a criminal—that by even mentioning the name of William B. Lingard, she had shocked this woman into unconsciousness!

Almost immediately the latter stirred and opened her eyes.

"Aleda! You—you said something——? Wha—what was it?"

Aleda put her arms about Marise. "You come. I'll help you over to the couch."

She got Marise to her feet. The latter stood for a moment, leaning heavily on the younger girl. She put a hand up vaguely to her forehead.

"You said something, Aleda? You—you startled me!"

"I'm ever so sorry. Here. Lie down a minute." She supported Marise towards the settee.

Marise sank back, white-faced, while Aleda ran to get some ice from the refrigerator. She dropped a piece into a glass of water, and while Marise drank, gently dabbed her forehead with another piece of ice.

"There! Now you're better! I'm ever so sorry, Marise, dear, that I—er startled you!"

"That's all right, Aleda. I sometimes get these spells. It was—being out so late last night—and not getting enough sleep——"

A wave of pity for Marise caught the girl. "I'm going to take care of you——" She went over to the stove, and poured a fresh cup of coffee. "You take this."

As she sipped the hot liquid, a little flush stole into Marise's white face. She said, a quaver in her voice: "What with worry . . . and one thing and another . . . I'm as nervous as a cat . . ." —she caught her breath— "You said something—about—an old friend of mine?"

"You mean, Mr. Lingard?" Aleda, in the circumstances, was afraid to speak that name. Its effect so recently had been disastrous on this woman.

"I—I don't look on him—as a friend. If it's the same person—it must be the same!—he's a hard, cruel man! I—oh, I can't explain it to you, Aleda! But don't work in his office. Don't, don't have anything to do with him!"

Aleda was caught in a dilemma. She loved this job of hers. An immediate salary was essential. It had not been easy to get work in this city. She could not live on air. She must send money to her people. And—if she left Lingard's employment—she might never have the chance to see Gary Chester again!

But she didn't want to argue with Marise or further distress her in any way!

"Look here, you and I'll have a long talk tonight. Now I'll run up and get Goldie, and she'll stay with you."

Marise put out a quick, arresting hand half rising. "Don't go near Goldie. She's sleeping. And don't you say one single word to her! Even though she is my sister, I—I don't tell her my private affairs. Goldie's never even heard of—of this Lingard."

"But she knows that I work in his office. I've mentioned his name——"

"That doesn't matter"—Marise gave another little gasp which frightened Aleda—"that doesn't matter, so long as I'm not connected with what you say. And promise me"—her eyes were full of pleading— "you won't speak about me to Lingard? You won't mention me having known him?"

"Of course not. I'm only a stenographer. I'm not on any free-and-easy terms with the boss." Aleda was mystified and dubious, and—sorry as she was for Marise—was beginning to be a trifle irritated. She was already late. She would get in trouble. Marise, because of some triviality or blunder on her own part, wanted her to give up her good job. With other people dependent on her earnings, this sort of scene was pretty trying, wasn't it?

"So long as he doesn't know I know him," Marise was now reiterating, in a voice which she tried to make composed, but which threatened to become hysterical, "and as long as he doesn't see a picture of me, it wouldn't matter so much if you did happen to mention Marise de Renze to William Lingard—because he knew me by—by *another name!*"

Another name? "The plot certainly thickens!" thought Aleda grimly. She wondered if she had been wrong in ever coming to this house?

* * * * * *

"Good afternoon!" sarcastically rapped out the Spanish-looking clerk, Dolores, when Aleda reached the office thirty minutes late. "Don't hurry yourself. William B.'s already arrived"—she jerked her head towards the inner sanctum—"he's rung for you twice. He's in a rage."

But the granite face of her employer was quite impas-

sive as Aleda—notebook and pencil in hand—went into his room.

"Illness at home detained me. I am sorry to be late."

He made no comment. He dictated letters to her for an hour.

At half-past twelve she went to the dressing room for a glass of water. When she returned to the outer office Dolores again jerked her sleek head towards her employer's sanctum and whispered: "The handsome Mr. Chester is with the boss."

"I'm going out for lunch," Aleda said with forced nonchalance.

Back in the dressing room she slipped her coat and hat on, and waited, Gary Chester's gift of gloves held in her hand. From this vantage ground she could see across the corridor the door of Lingard's private office, and when Gary emerged—(oh! it wouldn't be too bold of her? —she'd make it seem quite natural and accidental!)—she would follow him down the corridor and into the lift. . . .

CHAPTER XXII

ALEDA—waiting in the dressing room with her hat and coat on, her ears keyed for the sound of Gary Chester's step when he should emerge from Lingard's inner office—found herself trembling.

"Fool that I am! To stoop to such a thing! Spying and watching!"

She went over to the tiny strip of mirror, and for the second time put a dab of powder on her face. He mustn't see that flush . . . that eagerness!

The moments slipped away.

Was Gary never coming? She went back to the door again, her nerves a-strain. She opened it a little wider, peering through the crack.

Her hands were shaking. So ardently she wished to see him! This waylaying—it wasn't really she—the proud Aleda—who would hang about and stoop to this?

"I'm ashamed of myself. I'll go——"

She started to draw on the blue kid gauntlets, fighting a little battle with herself, but somehow making delay. . . .

"It isn't bold to want to thank him for his present!"

Yet, suppose the gloves had not been sent by him, after all?

Or suppose he had noticed her "keenness" yesterday, and in amused recollection of the kiss, up state, had thought the payment of the "forfeit" would delight her,

just as it would delight any common girl?—hadn't he, in delirium, called her a milkmaid?

He thought of her as in that class, no doubt? Since he recollected the kiss, even the delirium had been a fake?

What did she know about this Gary Chester who had sent such a fever through her veins?

"I'll go! He thinks I'm common enough already!" she told herself, with a violent quiet. "I shouldn't have taken tea with him yesterday. I made myself 'cheap.'"

She flung the door wide open and collided with Dolores on the mat.

"Mercy, child! You've been fifteen minutes in here, communing with yourself! Or were you getting all primped-up to meet a beau?"

Aleda flushed scarlet. Because the Spanish girl's black eyes were sharp, she fibbed, saying: "I had a headache. I was resting."

"We'll lunch together," suggested Dolores, who had no swain to meet that day, and disliked her own company. "The fresh air will soon set you up." She drew out a shark's-skin cigarette-case. "While I'm fixing myself, you take a puff."

"Oh, no, I don't smoke." Aleda drew back.

Dolores laughed mockingly. "Mama's little angel-face! Don't look so scared!"

She lit a cigarette herself, and—with the cigarette dangling from one corner of her mouth—proceeded with her toilette. She wore a dress of bright red crepe. It had a flaunting air. Her hat was of the same vermilion color.

Over her frock she donned a wrap of black satin.

"Don't look like a 'woiking goil' now, do I?" Dolores dropped the cigarette from her mouth, trod on it with her heel, and over the lips where the weed had dangled so precariously, she executed an artistic carmine curve.

"That vivid enough, eh?" She regarded herself in the mirror, the lipstick poised in midair.

Aleda stood nervously by the door, her ears—against her volition and pride—ever harking for Gary Chester's step.

She didn't want to meet him in the company of Dolores, who looked like a flaunting passion-flower!

She didn't want to meet him at all! she told herself.

"You dress too soberly," admonished Dolores, who had now applied a treble layer to her lips, and was ready to go out. "That suit's too school-girly—and, my God, your hat! Don't you want men to see you're on the earth, my child?"

She caught Aleda by the arm, quite friendly, despite her pert criticism. Her sharp eyes lighted on the gloves. "Parisian! Where on earth did you get 'em?"

"They were a present," Aleda stiffly said. She felt she really could not bear Dolores, at this moment.

But she had no reasonable excuse for not leaving the building with the girl.

The elevator shot them downward with a crowd of others, and soon the two were out in the thoroughfare.

Dolores was masterful. She conducted the country maid across Wall Street, up a block or two and into a lunch-room.

"We'll go fifty-fifty." She ordered herself a highly seasoned Spanish dish. "Red pepper and chili go with my volcanic temperament." She gave Aleda a wink. She mocked at the latter's selection of tea and scrambled eggs.

Aleda but half listened while Dolores rambled on. Was Gary Chester still closeted with William B.? He probably had left the building now? Had he given a thought in her direction when he passed her empty desk?

Marise's curious fainting spell! Odd how the mere mention of Mr. Lingard's name had wrought such havoc in Marise!

"Men are all the same," she suddenly heard Dolores saying, in her quick staccato voice. "They like style and dash and flattery and pep and money and position in a woman—that's what gives the Countess Dellamanca such a flying start!"

"Mr. Lingard's niece, you mean?" Aleda's thoughts turned to Gary Chester. Hadn't Dolores once told her that this woman was "crazy" over the young man?

"Yep. The beauteous huntress. The danger-sign."

Twenty minutes later, just as the two girls neared the office building, up to the curb drew a long, luxurious car. In the tonneau was a lovely ash blonde lady in a Summer toilette that was exquisite. Dolores nudged Aleda, whispered slangily: "Pipe the boss's niece!"

At that moment, out from the building stepped Gary Chester. The lady in the car leaned from the window, signaled to him. He hurried towards her, sweeping his hat from off his head. They spoke together. He hesitated—she pleaded.

"Didn't I tell you so?" triumphantly whispered Dolores, as they saw young Chester—smiling and apparently in the best of spirits—drive off in the Countess Dellamanca's limousine.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE Countess Dellamanca was extremely bored.

In her Louis XIV bed in the smart Park Avenue hotel she awoke to a new day.

She yawned and stretched amid the perfumed linen sheets and lacy little pillows.

Oh! to lie here forever, dreaming happy dreams and never be awakened!

What was the good of rising and facing another day that, in its boredom, would be exactly like its predecessors? Life, despite her beauty, wealth, position, was stale, flat and unprofitable!

Thus mused the Countess Dellamanca, whom a number of people envied, but whom (so she assured herself, in her super-egotistical way) never had been "understood."

"I understand you only too well, cara mia," her handsome Italian husband, Count Mario, had said. (How he had maddened her!) "You are bored so with life because you are—what is the English word?—a monomaniac? You think—first, last and always—only of yourself!"

At that she had been furious. Latterly, in the last stormy year in Rome, she had indeed been angered—and extremely disagreeable—most of the time.

She had lived so hard, and yet—despite her three marriages—achieved so little in the way of real happiness!

Her goals had fluctuated so. Beginning "life" at sixteen when she ran off from boarding-school with a mem-

ber of the local vaudeville house orchestra, she had learned—first, passion—and then, misery!

Her people had annulled that marriage, but not before the victim (the Countess Dellamanca always took the martyr's role, and never blamed herself for her own blunders) had gained a first-hand and extremely sordid view of life.

Some years later came her loveless mercenary union with the rich broker Schumph.

Grown accustomed to his wealth and having every whim gratisfied, the main idea of the lovely Inez was to maintain as great a distance as possible (metaphorically as well as literally) between the elderly husband and the young wife.

He was a bad sailor, so she went off frequently on yachting trips.

He was not musical, so she insisted on a box at the opera throughout the season, and amidst her galaxy of squires, the fat, homely "good provider" was not missed.

She cultivated society with a big "S." Despite her husband's wealth, it was an uphill climb. Inez's temper —never of the best at any time—was considerably impaired by social snubs.

She "flashed" about however, beautifully gowned and be-jeweled. Her villa at Newport (the elite gave her many a rebuff!) was a dream of a place.

And wasn't her houseboat down in Florida a floating palace?

She went off on many trips to Europe, in pursuit of clothes and culture—Paris being the hub of the universe, she said, for a woman of her mind. She had periodical fits of declaiming American men as "boorish" . . . her remarks were sometimes quoted in the papers, and were not entirely kind.

Nor tactful.

Nor was her behavior all it should have been, the busybodies said. Wasn't she cited as co-respondent in a divorce case that began in Vienna and ended in New York, and even though it was all a matter of spite—so wept the lovely Mrs. Schumph—and her name was withdrawn, and her husband (who was quite kind and sympathetic in the matter) seen about again with her in public, "there is no smoke without fire," declared her critics, who were numerous.

Having married a man who was old enough to be her father, Mrs. Schumph, however, soon drifted off on her own tack. While at Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo, she found a hectic and fabulously rich admirer in an Egyptian of high rank.

Her beau's latest wife, unfortunately (he had his own harem!) misunderstood the situation, and one moonlit evening followed the couple in one of her husband's cars out to the Pyramids, there quitting the machine and proceeded to pursue the pair, on camel-back, to the Sphinx.

The Arab guides informed the furiously jealous Oriental that the lovely American lady and her escort had departed—and a malignant smile seemed to decorate even the granite-hewn features of that notoriously inscrutable creature, the Sphinx!

The Egyptian wife rushed back to Mena House (which is nearby) and found her truant spouse and Mrs. Schumph imbibing champagne cocktails. She flung a knife—being an uncontrolled lady of the harem—and the "interloper" as a souvenir bears, on her neck, a slight scar to this day.

Her embassy advised the well-known "flight out of Egypt"—and when Mrs. Schumph was out of the nursing-home she caught—at Alexandria—the next boat.

Back in New York, she found the patient Mr. Schumph

—since even a worm will turn, and one bad turn deserves another!—had become interested in little ladies of the chorus.

Ah! here was her chance to get (with enormous alimony!) a divorce!

But little pitchers have long ears. Mr. Schumph was little. His ears were not his prettiest features, being protuberant, but they were long! And he had heard too much —about her "gigolos" in Paris and in Deauville—and last, but not least, the little "affaire" of the Egyptian.

He refused her request in plain and rather brutal language. There would be no divorce . . . no reconciliation . . . and he would cut off her allowance.

"What on earth am I to do?" sobbed Mrs. Schumph.

CHAPTER XXIV

As SHE rested in her luxurious suite in the Park Avenue hotel, the one-time Mrs. Schumph—now Countess Dellamanca—looked back over her life.

Her thoughts were not happy ones. Despite her wealth and her position, she was a discontented woman. For she had put nothing into life.

But hadn't she been "crazy over" her third husband, Mario Dellamanca? Living here in her bedroom with the shades drawn down (she didn't want to see the sunshine—it reminded her too much of Italy!)—the features of the handsome Count came up before her, ever and anon. . . .

She tried to shut the image out. Hadn't she quarreled with her Roman husband, and the chances were that he —being extraordinarily proud and obstinate—would never in this world take her back again?

He didn't want her back! That hateful and humiliating thought swept through her mind.

Neither her beauty nor her money—no, not even memory of the romantic dreams she had aroused in Dellamanca once—would have the power to blind his eyes to what she really was, a second time!

How those black eyes had flashed at her, in uttermost contempt!

"You say you bought me with your money? With the dollars of the poor Meester—how you call it?—Schumph?—whose life you made so mee-serable? Then

I have fee-neeshed with you, and you will take all the dollars back again! Because I do not weesh to die prema-turely, through sorrow with having such a wife—like the poor Schumph!"

She had been so startled, then, that she had even forgotten to mock Mario's funny English as she usually did. She had sailed for New York, a city she had not seen in six years—not since the death of Schumph, who had left her millions—to the surprise of everybody—since the pair had been "separated" many years!

"That sort of woman always comes out top dog!" the busy-bodies said, forgetting the long period when the lovely Inez had "dropped out" of everything, due to lack of funds.

Her life had indeed been a chequered one during the period of the "separation." Schumph had been curiously adamantine in the matter of an allowance—sometimes sending her a substantial check—and then ignoring her for months and even years.

She was an orphan by this time, and William B. Lingard—her uncle—and her old-maid sister were her nearest relatives. He had grown rich, but towards his niece he wasn't sympathetic. Indeed her finances were so strained for a time that she had even worked as a manicurist!

"Instead of being ashamed of it, it's about the only worth-while thing you ever did in your life!" William B. Lingard had informed her when one day she presented herself tearfully at his office. He had given her $500 to pay some debts she had contracted and at the same time a homily she did not relish. "If you want to you can come and live with your aunt and me, provided you behave decently and make yourself useful around the house."

Inez had availed herself of that, and for eighteen

months had seemed to be an altered person. She was not devoid of brains, or rather, acumen. The old-maid aunt was a colorless, negligible, kindly being, easy to deal with and "get round"—and William B. Lingard was only human and a man, and therefore open to judicious flattery!

The eighteen months were not so horribly unpleasant, then. Her aim was so to establish herself as to get the status of "adopted daughter"—not "just a failure of a niece"—and as her uncle was rising very rapidly and making lots of money, she would stay close to where her immediate interest lay!

The death of Schumph and her unexpected good luck in getting his millions (she hadn't realized that the old boy had been so rich, or she would have conducted herself in a more seemly manner!) was too, too providential. She dropped all thought of further camouflage and of sticking close to her uncle's money and fled to Europe with the spoils!

But her trials had softened the widow. For, meeting the handsome Dellamanca in Rome about a year or so later, she fell head over heels in love with, and married, the attractive nobleman.

Be it said for her that it was not alone the title. Mario —such a contrast to poor Schumph, thought she—had melted that hitherto invulnerable organ, Inez Schumph's heart.

There was a glorious honeymoon on the Italian lakes, a trip to India, a big-game expedition in East Africa (Mario was a crack shot in more ways than one, and a real sportsman!)—and for a period the Countess did forget her egotism, or it looked like that!

But now it seemed as though her third marriage was to go the way of the preceding ones, and here she was

surrounded by sycophants (queer how she had such a fatal fascination for all sorts of rotters and toadiers!), back in New York again!

She'd keep her chin up, anyhow. There was this queer ache in her heart for Mario—who had spurned her—but she wasn't going to pay attention to that ache.

"Bring me a hand-mirror," she called out now to her Italian maid. "And let's have a little sunshine after all! Pull up the shades!"

The girl moved up a blind or two, discreetly, so that a softly diffused light flooded the room.

The Countess Dellamanca, propped up in bed, surveyed her own reflection.

"Hm! I'm still young and pretty. Not so?" she inquired of the maid, as she turned and twisted the glass.

"Madame is beau-tee-ful!"

"Then I shan't hide my beauty! I will face the sunlight," said the Countess Dellamanca, beaming. "Call up Mr. Gary Chester and tell him I wish to lunch with him!"

CHAPTER XXV

ALEDA's heart gave a sick thud as she saw Gary Chester get into the limousine with Countess Dellamanca, and drive off.

"That woman's a huntress, if ever there was one!" remarked her companion, with a brusque laugh. "What chance have we poor 'working goils against the wealthy wimmins?' While we're wasting our youth and good looks, bending over desks in a stuffy office, typing all day until our backs are nearly broken, not to mention getting neuritis of the fingers, the high-and-mighty Dellamanca's in her Park Avenue suite getting herself rejuvenated with ice-packs and massage and manicures and marcel waves, and laying her plans!"

This seemed too true. Aleda found herself quoting the Scriptural injunction: "To him that hath shall be given."

Dolores shot her a sharp look. "If I were in your shoes, I'd grab off a rich husband, quick. Get planted in a nice garden that'll do credit to your beauty, and let the man get out and hustle for you. But in the meantime, don't let anybody fool you. And, above all, don't play the waiting game!"

Aleda flushed. Had the sharp eyes of Dolores noticed her confusion over Gary Chester? Aleda was inordinately proud.

"I'm married to a poor man—and separated from

him," went on Dolores, grimly. "It's a rotten life. I haven't the cause—nor yet the money—to get legally free of him. Gosh! I wish I had my time over again—and your chance!"

"What chance?" They were back in the office now, and Aleda putting sheets of paper and carbon into her machine. "With or without money, I don't know any men who'd fall in love with me——"

"You can find ways and opportunities, if you use your wits," cryptically rejoined the other, "I grant you you wouldn't have much chance against the Dellamanca woman, for she's got all the winning cards in her hand—but you wouldn't be such a fool as to pit your little self against her strength! However, that's beside the question——"

Ah! was it beside the question? Aleda's thoughts were on Gary Chester—he had smiled so winningly upon the lovely Countess Dellamanca! Her heart sank.

* * * * * *

At half-past five, Aleda got into the Wall Street subway amid pushing crowds.

She was jammed into a train among the humans that were packed as tightly as a can of sardines. Through rocky caverns, shot with blue flame, the train rocked and roared.

How suffocatingly hot it was!

She felt, even with people pressing on every side of her, extraordinarily alone!

Up home just now, in the cool mountains, with the soft airs blowing over Indian Lake, her mother would be getting supper ready, her father coming in from work upon the farm and looking for his newspaper.

Darling mother and dad!

For the small amount of money she could weekly send to them, was this aching separation really worth while?

Depression had fallen upon Aleda. Her courage was at a low ebb.

A dark-skinned man was grinning at her. There was something saturnine about his face. Was this Dante's Inferno, then, these rocky caverns?—the lights of the roaring train flashed off for a second—there was a flash of blue flame——

Her imagination overstrained, she felt she could not bear another moment of the subway, and at 14th Street she forced her way out.

Ah! blessed blue sky again, and gentle evening air!

She walked over to Fifth Avenue, and caught a bus marked Riverside. She clambered to the top and found a seat at the rear.

The vehicle swung off, traversing what has been called the handsomest street in the world.

The shops became more and more fascinating, displaying lovely dresses, and everything to make women beautiful. There were gorgeous evening wraps of satin and brocade in pastel colors, exotic millinery, cobweb lingerie, and little Summer frocks that looked like dainty flowers.

In expensive houses of this type the Countess Dellamanca did her purchasing, Aleda told herself. Perhaps at this very moment—her heart contracted painfully, but she forced herself to face it—Gary Chester was with the exotic beauty, getting more and more entangled in the toils . . .?

She gave herself an angry little shake. "You idiot! Why would a man who has the entrance to the best society—whom beautiful women seek out, and load with invitations—ever waste more than a passing smile on you?"

This queer, jumbled thing called life! When one was

poor, lonely and sensitive, one needed so much courage for the facing of it, didn't one?

The bus passed the mammoth hotels, where people by the hundred surged in and out. Like so many ants, all set about their own affairs!

How strange this sense of isolation, amid all the other humans!

The bus turned to cross the city, and not long after flying along 72nd Street, the river was reached.

Ah! better out here! Aleda could see the long stretch of water, dotted with vessels, that led out to the wide Atlantic and strange, foreign lands.

To these far countries, Gary Chester soon would be voyaging. It would be easier for her peace of mind if the attractive young man were setting forth now!

But a sort of calm, engendered by the river, stole into her tired heart. There is a hypnosis that the vista of water always brings with it. It worked its spell upon Aleda now.

When finally she left the bus at 40th Street, and cut across town to Marise's house, her thoughts reverted to the incidents of the morning, and Marise's queer fainting attack.

Marise hated Lingard, her employer. This was another tangled thread in the web of life. . . .

She would be very gentle with Marise this evening. She would forget her own loneliness in being sympathetic with another person's worries, perhaps bringing a little cheer to a sad heart.

When she reached the house, a letter was lying on a table in the lobby. Her heart caught in her throat. It was addressed to her—in the same strong, decisive handwriting in which the glove package had been addressed!

CHAPTER XXVI

Marise de Renze wanted love.

She was thirty-six years old, and desperately lonely.

This, despite the fact that she lived in a bustling house in the theatrical quarter of New York with her sister and her "guests"—(Marise always called the roomers "guests," it sounded more refined, she thought)—where there was a constant liveliness, a continual coming and going.

On this warm evening in the beginning of June, she was busy in the kitchen, getting supper ready. She was making a potato salad, as Goldie, her young sister, liked it, with beans and onions in it, and celery and hard-boiled eggs and beets and carrots.

Goldie was "pernicketty." It seemed to Marise—who was inclined to plumpness—that Goldie ate no more than a sparrow. And frequently, if she didn't fancy Marise's dishes, she would not touch anything.

Marise was worried about Goldie. The little sister was secretive. Marise didn't know half her friends. And for some of those she did know, she had no great relish.

She had high ambitions for Goldie. Wanted her to have everything in life that she herself had missed.

But Goldie was heedless and headstrong. One could not teach her anything. She was not tractable.

Marise had hoped the influence of Aleda—who was sweet, refined and sensible—might help to improve the pert young flapper.

Yet Goldie, if anything, was perter still when Aleda was about!

"Maybe she's jealous of Aleda, because I'm right fond of the girl?" Marise had surmised.

On this early Summer evening, as she worked in her hot basement kitchen, her mind reverted continually to this morning's incident, when Aleda had sprung a bomb upon her unexpectedly, with the name of Lingard!

"I made a darned fool of myself! What on earth will the girl think of me, fainting away like that?" A return of the old dizziness made Marise sit down suddenly in the rocker near the stove. Her heart was thudding oddly. She felt queer and weak.

"Oh, just the heat!" She fanned herself with her bungalow apron. She would deny that the very thought of her long-ago sweetheart still had potent power!

She leaned back in the rocker for a moment and closed her eyes. Her fancy—despite her effort to the contrary—leapt back over the intervening years.

Springtime! The woods full of trilling bird-calls, and trailing arbutus, and speedwell, and celandine! Clear water flowing and dimpling over the green weeds! A rustic bridge—two lovers—sap rising in the trees—love welling in two human hearts!

She had been only two-and-twenty, and William B. Lingard was asking her to marry him.

There had been violets in her hands that he had plucked for her. How tightly she had gripped them, in a sort of ecstasy! Now, down the long trail of fourteen years, it seemed as though she could still smell the crushed sweetness of those flowers!

Ah! happy days!

Ah! hopes that never reached fruition!

Wretched misunderstanding, cruel unbelief, and pride

had raised their hydra heads to separate the lovers. William B. Lingard—though he had loved her—had walked off in anger and in obstinacy.

For years Marise had told herself she hated this man who had caused havoc to her happiness. Long since, with other loves and other interests come into her busy, albeit chequered life, she had relegated William B. Lingard to the dusty attic which is part of every human mind.

And now—only this morning—his name had suddenly been sprung upon her by her guest, Aleda Ray, who was acting as private secretary to him!

She—Marise—had only to walk into the offices on some pretext for a word with Aleda, and the chances are that she and her long ago sweetheart would come face to face!

She hadn't the courage. No use denying it! She had loved him so!

Her heart ached now with loneliness . . . and with regret.

* * * * * *

"Goodness! How you startled me!" Marise jumped up from her rocker by the stove as Aleda entered the kitchen.

Aleda's eyes were shining. There was a pinkness and a radiance in her pretty, fresh young face. She held a letter in her hand. And she was smiling.

"Oh, Marise dear! Feeling better? I've worried about you all day!"

"I'm fit as a fiddle! Just had a fit of laziness, and was resting a moment before the ravenous wolves troop in for their supper." Marise bustled about the kitchen, getting out the plates. "How's everything, Aleda? You look as though someone had left you a million dollars, huh? What's in that letter of yours?"

The young girl blushed. "Oh, it's just a—a word of thanks—for a sort of a service I did—forwarded on from my old home——"

Marise turned around. "Don't kid me, child! I know that look in the eyes! It's a love letter! Come on, confess!"

"It isn't." Aleda laughed to hide her blushes. It's quite a formal sort of a letter—the funny bit is I've seen the young man—twice—since he wrote this. But—it sort of gives me a new light on his character—it makes me see how charming he is!"

CHAPTER XXVII

They sat together in the kitchen, Aleda and Marise. Like a beacon of light in a tunnel of darkness, that letter of Gary Chester's had been to the younger girl.

Written shortly after his accident in the Adirondacks, and forwarded from the hotel which had been her first "pied a terre" in New York, it was formal, yet at the same time delightfully friendly, and "interested."

"My angel of Mercy!" he had called her. That sent a warm glow through her veins.

To be appreciated by the man whose admiration meant so much to her!

To know that, in sending her the gloves—the forfeit!—he had not really held her "cheap," as she had thought!

Aleda was inordinately proud. She wanted to face life, always, with her chin held up.

"If you only knew how awfully lucky I think you are!" suddenly exclaimed Marise.

"Why so?" The forget-me-not blue eyes widened. Aleda, who—dreaming of her letter—had been figuratively perched upon Parnassus, came back to earth.

"Youth . . . simplicity . . . ideals . . . beauty . . . the bloom on the flower!" It was as though Marise were thinking out aloud. There was no trace of envy in the rather husky voice. There was a warmth, a kindliness, and yet a wistfulness. "Gosh! if I'd my life over again . . . if I were starting in like

you, Aleda, I'd pick the right path. . . . I'd wrest everything from life!"

"I want to. But often, in this big, rushing city, Marise, I grow—afraid!"

"That's been my trouble. I've been weak—and foolish. And I get so awfully tired out! I've even bought mottoes—Kipling's "IF"—and bits about "KEEPING ON" and "STICK AT IT" and that sort of uplift stuff—and hung them on the wall, to give me courage! Often—I know it's flabby of me—I'd give anything if I'd a strong arm to lean on—a—a real friend—I mean, a husband!"

Aleda was startled by this frank confession. She felt extraordinarily sympathetic at this moment towards Marise.

"Security . . . a home . . . someone who really loves you!" continued Marise. It was almost as though she had forgotten Aleda's presence. "We bluff, and camouflage, and boast about our independence, silly geese that we women are! We miscall marriage, and husbands—we applaud divorce—but at the bottom of our hearts we're only half alive until we've found our complement—our 'other part'—and even then if things go wrong isn't there a proverb that half a loaf is better than no bread?"

"You mean—Clive Mortimer?" slipped from Aleda's lips. She could have bitten out her stupid tongue for saying such a thing, but it was too late . . . too apt!

Marise was not offended. There was something at this moment very rock-solid, very genuine, about Marise.

"Just that. But, thinking of the real, satisfying things you've missed, the half loaf can leave you very hungry!" quaintly she said.

* * * * * *

There was a pause—a silence in Marise's kitchen, broken only by the hum of outside traffic and the tick-tock of the old grandfather clock.

Then: "I'm worried about Goldie!" Marise stopped her gentle rocking. Her eyes were focused far away, as though she were a seer, looking down strange vistas into her little sister's future . . . and the sight disturbed Marise.

Aleda reassured her: "Goldie's just a child. You give her time. You let her wings sprout stronger——"

"They've already carried her too fast and far!"

"Why, what's the trouble?"

Marise bit her underlip. "She's so crazy on men—and money! The gold-diggers are her heroines! And, not content with working at the Harvest Moon, she's got a new, mysterious job that keeps her out of the home from three till eight, and sometimes even nine and ten in the evenings! She's making money at it, too. Last night, her pocketbook was full of bills. There was a letter—I read it, for I'm all wrapped up in Goldie and I figured I had a right to—it was from some married woman who was wanting to keep tabs on her husband—she offered Goldie $50 for information about him and some girl Goldie evidently was acquainted with—oh! it gave me the cold shivers, just to read that note!"

Aleda said, with a quick intake of breath: "But Goldie wouldn't stoop to spy on people? Goldie isn't that kind of a girl!"

Marise's eyes filled. Her lips quivered. "She's got the Broadway money-fever, and it sort of casts a spell on her! I hope it isn't so, but I was afraid that maybe her new job is working for some shady detective agency? There are such risks and such under-currents in this city —who knows but Goldie's life might be in danger? I

was wondering—was wondering if it would be any use to speak to Clive?"

Clive Mortimer! Those near-set, crafty eyes of his! Would it not be a case of "set a thief to catch a thief," or, at best, "the blind leading the blind?"

"Do you know much about this Eglishman, beyond the fact that he hasn't made a success in his own country, nor yet over here?" Aleda was afraid—knowing Marise's liking for the man—to fully speak her mind.

Before Marise could answer, there was a flurry of footsteps coming down the basement stairs, a high, girlish laugh, and into the kitchen—in great good spirits, arm-in-arm—walked Goldie and Clive!

CHAPTER XXVIII

BALZAC has written:—"The greatest tyranny is to love where we are not loved again."

Sitting at Marise's supper-table in the house on West Fortieth Street, observing Goldie's patronizing manner toward her elder sister, and Clive's cool indifference towards the woman who for long had been so good to him, Aleda—watching Marise's face—was reminded of those words.

Aleda had read considerably. Largely self-taught, she was a well-educated girl.

Psychology had fascinated her. There were lots of studies for her now at first hand.

Marise's fainting fit this morning, at the very mention of William B. Lingard's name! That after fourteen years—which seemed a century to young Aleda!—a mere memory could have such potent power to hurt!

And, since long ago when she first knew Aleda's employer, what had Marise's life been in the intervening time?

Aleda—as had been her habit when particularly struck by any special passage in a book—had memorized some words of Bulwer's which now seemed very applicable to poor Marise:—

"'A woman may live without a lover, but a lover once admitted, she never goes through life with only one. She

is deserted, and cannot bear her anguish and solitude, and hence fills up the void with a second idol.' "

Marise had taken a long journey, from William B. Lingard, that forceful personality . . . to Clive!

As the French queried, when it came to matrimony, was a half loaf really better than no bread at all?

She—Aleda—who was idealistic, demanded everything, or nothing! She would always put her lover on a pedestal!

Goldie was talking recklessly, in her high, shrill tones. Marise, who still had a headache, lingering over from the morning, asked her to speak more quietly.

At this, her sister jeered: "You're antediluvian!"

Clive Mortimer grinned at Goldie: "Why don't you study Shakespeare?"

She made a face at him. "I'm a little Broadway chorine"—she mimicked his precise English accents—"not a bloomin' tragedian!"

He turned in his superior manner, to Aleda. "That little savage doesn't get my meaning. I'll bet a dollar no one at this table—in reference to twangs—knows why I asked Goldie to read Shakespeare concerning a certain sweet-toned heroine. . . .?"

"Ha! Got you—and your dollar!" laughed Aleda. "Here's your quotation about Shakespeare's charmer:

" 'Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low,
An excellent thing in woman!' "

Clive was astonished, frankly, at her quickness. Marise looked envious, and Goldie annoyed.

"A pity such brilliance is wasted on mere stenogging!" Her painted mouth twisted at one corner as she shot Aleda a venomous look. "You and Clive think you're

mighty high-hat and clever, don't you? But I think you're both damn rude!"

As Clive pushed a dollar bill towards Aleda, Miss Goldie grabbed it, tore it into little pieces, and with a: "You won't make a ninny out of me!" she flung the fragments in Clive's face.

* * * * * *

In a free moment in her office on the following day, Aleda started to write a letter of thanks to Gary Chester.

Because of the handsome pair of gloves he'd sent her, that was surely correct! she told herself.

She made several beginnings, however, but with none was she satisfied.

She must not seem too eager.

Yet too formal a note would be absurd.

It would be much easier if she could but have the opportunity to thank him personally.

Aleda finally wrote her letter.

She was in cheerful mood today. She had a presage that a lot of pleasant happenings were waiting just around the corner for her . . . she would hold that high and happy thought.

News from her home was good. There had been letters from mother and dad.

That seemed to bring her closer to the old folks who were oh! so dear to the young girl.

The money she had sent from her pay-envelope had eased home housekeeping that week, her mother wrote.

To have the privilege of helping those she loved, sent a glow through Aleda's heart. She would have a typewriter installed in her bedroom in Marise's house on the hire-purchase plan.

Oh! it was good to be young and strong and competent, with the whole world in front of one!

Her co-worker, Dolores, was out of the room for a moment, and when the door opened, Aleda thought it was the Spanish girl returning to her desk.

The step halted beside her. A shadow fell athwart her typewriting machine.

She looked up—met the fine eyes of Gary Chester.

"How you startled me!" A lovely flush rose to Aleda's cheek. "—I just wrote you a note"—she took her courage and plunged in boldly—"in answer to yours, and to thank you for the gift——"

"Not a gift? A forfeit!" he corrected, smiling down on her. "If the gloves fit, you'll wear 'em? That's a bargain, isn't it?"

Was it her girlish fancy, or did his question have a double meaning? Was it a sort of a portent, as it were?

Seeing him there beside her desk, so handsome and gallant and so "interested," her thoughts lifted on wings of ecstasy.

Would it continue and develop, this quaint friendship? The hope of it was like a song flung out in joy about her heart.

He said whimsically, an eager glint in his gray eyes, and still smiling down on her:—

"If the fairy coach awaited the princess at six o'clock this evening, would her highness step out with—a very ordinary young man?"

CHAPTER XXIX

In the mirror in the office dressing room, Aleda took a survey of herself.

Forget-me-not blue eyes were dancing with excitement. Her cheeks, the skin clear as a baby's, carried a delicate pink flush. Over her ears, and spraying across her forehead, the waves of her soft brown hair rippled and swirled.

Her lips were parted—eager—redly curved.

The other office-workers had gone home. She was to meet Gary Chester at six. It was now quarter of the hour.

She mounted a chair to more correctly view the "hang" of her plain little skirt. This navy suit was trim and workmanlike. Yet stylish, too, in its simplicity.

As she twisted now before the mirror, her young figure —lissom as a sapling—showed faint, futuristic curves.

Her heart was thudding with excitement. In less than 15 minutes she would see—her man!

New York no longer seemed extraordinarily lonely. It was an enchanted city because it held the fairy prince!

Her prince! A Cinderella, wasn't she? This was the very man for whom she'd dreamed. . . .

On her short, straight little nose she dabbed a touch of powder. It would never do to have a shiny look!

But a shiny, starry look did lurk in the forget-me-not blue eyes as, some minutes later, Aleda—shy and sweet

and hesitant—emerged from the swinging doors of the huge office building out into Wall Street.

Would he be there? Where was his car?

Oh! unconventional this was! She shouldn't do it!

But, with so many lovely girls in this great city, if one hung back, and didn't take one's opportunity, what chance had one?

A long, low-slung, scarlet roadster was drawn up beside the curb. Its owner—in a suit of light gray flannel, a gardenia in his buttonhole, and looking very handsome—approached the girl.

"I'm certainly in luck!" He helped her into the car.

She never had looked prettier than at that moment. She gave him her hand—so neatly gauntleted in the blue kid gloves that he had sent her as a "forfeit"—and, exhibiting an ankle that would have done credit to a Follies beauty, climbed into the machine.

She sank into the little bucket seat beside him. He noted the clean-cut and appealing profile, the sweet droop of her pretty head set on the long, graceful throat—pretty as a flower.

There was a shy and wistful loveliness—a delicacy about this girl that touched his beauty-loving senses and at the same time made a definitely spiritual appeal. Only a little country maid—but like a shy, gracious young princess at this moment! Something caught at his throat at sight of her.

He suggested: "I thought we'd take a run out to the country, and dine—anywhere you fancy? Would that be —quite agreeable to you?"

She nodded, her face all a-sparkle, just as though the sun were breaking out through rosy clouds.

"That would be lovely."

He threw in the clutch, released the brake, trod on the

accelerator, and the car sprang forward. They were soon in Broadway, dodging in and out of the traffic, and flying along at a great pace.

Aleda leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. Young Chester and herself—a whole, long evening of delightful possibilities stretching out before them! There flashed under her closed lids a panorama of events . . . delicious dreams!

She hadn't dared to hope that he would ask her out so soon. . . .

Now—this!

Here, in the roaring traffic of the city, with the street cars clanging, horns a-hooting, people springing hither and yon, and taking their lives into their hands to dodge the rush of oncoming vehicles, Aleda felt—not merely extraordinarily exhilarated—but extraordinarily at peace! It seemed to her as though she and this Gary Chester—whom so longingly, so achingly, she'd thought about, these many weary days!—were in a sort of isolation. . . .

He didn't talk much. He was looking ahead, his strong brown hands firm on the steering wheel.

How well he drove! How easily this high-powered car responded to his touch!

Did girls respond as readily to this magnetic, dominating person? Aleda—a sudden twinge at her heart—asked of herself.

She shook the query off, impatiently. Oh! just like a woman, wasn't it, to spoil this high and happy hour?

Up, up Fifth Avenue, across a bridge that teemed with other vehicles—lights gleaming on the water far below—and then Long Island—little towns with streets that were cobble-stoned.

"We'll soon be out in the real country," Gary announced.

High in the pale blue of the evening sky rose a faint crescent of the new, young moon.

Fields flashed away from them, redolent of clover. There was a scent of honeysuckle—or was it June roses?—in the warm, soft air.

Enchanting, this motor run!

Aleda said: "I feel like Cinderella going to the ball! Did my fairy godmother wave her wand over a pumpkin and produce this car?"

Young Chester laughed. "I'd be awfully flattered if you really thought I was a prince."

She thrust a slim foot forward.

"I've already got the gloves! Where is my slipper?"

"You'll let me fit it on?"

"Maybe!" She contrived a coquettish shrug. "Though glass is brittle!"

"Let's make it stronger. Let's make it smaller—more sparkling: a thousand times more *valuable* than glass!" He took his right hand from the steering wheel, grabbed at her left hand.

Her heart thudded so violently it nearly choked Aleda.

"More valuable than glass?"

Oh! *Did* he—*could* he—mean that magic emblem—insignia of two hearts united—a *DIAMOND?*

CHAPTER XXX

THE car flew over the Long Island roads. Aleda, snuggled deep into the bucket seat, watched Gary Chester's clean-cut profile over the steering wheel.

He was both young and handsome. Like an Adonis, wasn't he? How sharply etched against the evening sky were the strong lines of his chin and jaw, the curve of the lips—so sweet and sensitive—the nose and forehead straightly meeting, as in the best tradition of the Greeks!

And high in the pale blue vault of heaven, above the couple, hung the slim crescent of a new, young moon.

In the long grass crickets hummed. There was a gentle whispering in the trees. Among the green and growing things the faintest rustling, as of new life stirring.

Aleda's heart was all atune to happiness.

Just he and she—out of the whole world—speeding along together in a wonderful proximity!

Cinderella transformed? The prince? And the glass slipper?

"Let's make it stronger—smaller—more sparkling and a thousand times more valuable than glass!" Gary Chester had said.

Oh! what had he meant to indicate?

A diamond?

Hadn't he grabbed her left hand, boyishly impulsive?

Hadn't he lifted her from this mundane world, and perched her—figuratively—on Mount Parnassus?

This was a dream—this nearness and this intimacy—intoxicating—heady—like a sweet narcotic!

Love seemed to beat about the flying car, with the spiced odor of a thousand poppies!

LOVE—twittering in the branches—calling to its mate. . . .!

Even the katydids, their chanting usually so monotonous—tonight, in honor of the great occasion—were calling love words to each other . . . and the tall trees, swaying dreamily, like lovers in a fond embrace, embodied love . . . and the lights glinting on the water, semaphored love's message. . . .!

She stole a glance at her companion. Her whole being thrilled to this enchanted hour.

With his free hand he'd caught hers, tightly, for a moment. Smiling, half quizzical, amused, yet with a spark aflame in those gray eyes of his, his gaze had rested on the "engagement" finger, and words—so gaily teasing, yet with an undertone of meaning—had rushed out. . . .

Oh! she must catch this magic mood of his before it passed!

"Cinderella is shy. Her speech is maybe just as cramped—restricted—as her foot would be in the glass slipper? What do you say?" She withdrew her hand from his touch.

Gary Chester laughed softly, as though utterly content with life.

"I'd say that, with or without the slipper, this little Cinderella could walk rough-shod over lots of hearts!"

Her breath caught. "She's no Cleopatra! Just a most ordinary, humdrum girl!"

Gary protested: "I won't allow you to miscall a very lovely little lady! If she only knew, however, her ca-

pacity for disturbing ordinary, humdrum men, she'd have a heart herself——"

"She *has* a heart!"

"Cased in asbestos?" he flung back at her, amused, intrigued.

"Wouldn't the prickly cactus be more likely, seeing this little Cinderella's from the country?" Oh! she would answer him in kind—maintain this quaint, exciting game of persiflage!

He laughed outright. He said, with smiling gallantry: "She's far too fine and sweet—if I'm any judge of character—to knowingly cause the slightest stab to anybody. And if she only knew what one young man thinks of her—humble as he may be—she'd be especially kind!"

Aleda's eyes were dancing. This role of sauciness, of daring, was extraordinarily novel—like a bird testing its wings for the first time—or like learning to fly an airplane!

"Kind sir, no man is humble! Flatter me not!"

"Ah! Where did you gain your knowledge? I thought my little Cinderella knew sweet nothing about the big, outside world."

She thrilled to the deep tenderness in his attractive voice. Her heart soared at the possessive pronoun "my" until it almost choked her.

But oh! She must not let him guess her feeling. She must not let herself into the category of "easy" girls who credited each compliment that fell from a man's lips on a Summer evening, when honeysuckle by the roadside drugged the senses and put honor on the tongue that might ensnare an inexperienced, too credulous young heart!

"Even a guileless little Cinderella has her woman's wits!" She flung that at him gaily, like a challenge.

"True daughter of Eve!" A shadow, like a question, flickered for a moment in his eyes.

She thought, tremulous with emotion, fearful of offending. "Am I giving him the wrong impression? Do I sound too 'sophisticate'?" Then, with a stab of fear: "Is he merely trying to flirt with me as maybe he's flirted with dozens of other girls? Is this the way a man of his brains and position usually talks to a girl he hasn't met socially, but who has jumped at his invitation without waiting for a formal introduction? Does—does he look on me as just an ordinary 'pick-up'?"

The thought was torture. It raced along her nerves, tore at her heart.

Because her lips were shaking with this dread, she sat there silent, by him, while the big car swallowed up the winding ribbon of road.

From time to time he flung a quick look at her, noting the wistful droop of the young head, the appealing profile, the sweet grace, that was Aleda.

So tremulous and shy—so brave. He'd seen the dreams, the courage, in those blue, blue eyes that sought to face this new, disturbing city life so gallantly. . . .

And into his heart, like music that was poignant in its sweetness, stole the urge to plant this pretty flower where nature and her own loveliness had intended her to bloom . . . far from the crowds and under brightest skies with only the softest breezes blowing harmoniously about her . . . himself the gardener, tending and caring for her with his own hand.

CHAPTER XXXI

Goldie de Renze sat in her tiny slice of a flower shop that was wedged like a cut in the wall, off Broadway, her calculating, tricky little mind revolving schemes whereby to annex unto herself a thick wad of dollars.

She wanted money. Quickly. Plentifully. Money would give her clothes, position, freedom to pursue her own way in life.

"I'm sick to death of Marise's coddling and fussing!" With a waspish irritation against her older sister's love, Miss Goldie thought and planned.

"Living in that old dump of a house on West Fortieth isn't going to get me anywhere!" It was maddening to have to account for every moment to Marise.

Even in the Harvest Moon—when rich men showed a tendency to be attentive—Marise would queer the whole game by hanging around "just like a frowzy old hen whose duckling is taking to the water," Goldie resentfully told herself, infuriated against the self-constituted chaperon.

"It's because I want you to get the very best from life!" Marise would tremulously explain herself. "I want my little sister to amount to something . . . to get everything I've missed. . . ."

"Be an old maid's darling, huh?" hissed Goldie, venomously, "Just because you've balled up your own chances, you want to throw a monkey-wrench in mine, eh? That

the stuff? But I don't call it affection. I call it downright jealousy!"

Marise had wept, thereby further incensing Goldie. "Be yourself, sister! Be your age—and don't hand me the sob line!"

"These men I'd guard you from . . . I know them . . . they've only bad intentions . . .!"

"Oh, God! She talks in nickel melerdrammer!" Goldie struck a mock attitude, jeering at her counsellor. "To think that the Harvest Moon—that pit of iniquity—has stolen such a great star from vaudeville!"

Marise had pulled herself together, wiped her eyes.

"The Harvest Moon is perfectly respectable and proper. If you'd only put a value on yourself and attract the right kind of men——"

"I do put a value on myself. I want wads and wads of dollars! That being so, what on earth are you kicking about?"

Marise protested: "It isn't that kind of a value I mean. It isn't gold-digging, and cheating. It isn't making yourself cheap to rotters—but setting a high standard of behavior for yourself. You're young and pretty and attractive, Goldie. I want to see you the wife of an honorable, decent man."

"Hear the old maid give the vamping lessons!" A pang, nevertheless, had shot through the mocker's heart—if Goldie did possess such an organ! "You want me to fly high—have a career like the Countess Dellamanca—cut her out?"

Goldie's pang was due to thoughts of the Dellamanca's escort, if the truth were to be told. The handsome young man—she didn't even know his name yet!—who had twice come to the Harvest Moon, watched her dance, and given her a kindly compliment. She thought he'd "fallen"

for her—she'd been mistaken—and yet she couldn't get him out of her mind!

But what possible chance had she against the wealthy, cosmopolitan beauty?

Only by garnering dollars quickly could she ever hope to put herself into the Dellamanca class!

Goldie admired and at the same time envied and disliked the Countess. But ardently and ambitiously she wished to emulate that same career!

She had "come up" from nothing—or next to nothing—hadn't she?

Goldie had not read Thackeray, but she realized that Dellamanca was a modern Becky Sharp!

And "sharp" she would be, too, if her own wits could compass the achievement!

She wouldn't be a weak fool, like Marise!

Marise's feeling for Clive Mortimer—the English ne'er-do-well—was laughable, in view of her recent high-flown counsellings.

"Why doesn't she practice what she preaches?" Goldie shrewdly inquired of herself. "Clive is as big a rotter as any of them, and what's a whole lot worse, he hasn't got a nickel——" (That was the unforgivable crime, in Goldie's concept) —"yet if he only popped the question to Marise, she's such a sentimental soul, she'd flop right in his arms, I do believe!"

Now, at this moment, into the tiny flower shop walked the subject of her thoughts.

He didn't walk—the slit of space was infinitesimally narrow—he wiggled, like an eel.

Indeed, there was something very eel-like in the sleeked-back, shiny hair, the furtive, darting eyes, the movements.

Goldie laughed out loud. It was a raucous sound, not pretty.

"Feeling cheery?" Clive's accent was very "English" and clipped.

It irritated Goldie. She hadn't forgotten his dig about her nasal twang versus "that excellent thing in woman," a sweet voice.

"No. I'm as blue as blue flames in hades! I was only giving you the merry ha-ha because you wiggled in here —your head so sleek, your body so twisty—just like a poor fish!"

"Oh, come. Don't be disagreeable, Miss Goldie! Fish or no fish, we're partners here. How's business today?"

"Rotten." She made a pert grimace. "As one fish to another, our line's not baited right, or the net isn't strong enough. Not even a nibble this afternoon!"

"It's quarter after six. Seen aything of Miss Aleda?" His eyes narrowed, calculatingly. "I've several cases of the best—real champagne—on my hands, and I thought maybe she might do a deal with that rich boss of hers? She's a simple sort of a girl—she's in need of money to help out her old parents. Couldn't we use her somehow, Goldie?"

The red-haired gamine made another face. "That staid Miss Prunes and Prisms!" Then, spitefully: "I don't believe she's better than anybody else, for all her airs! She phoned Marise today that she wouldn't be home for supper, as she's off joy-riding with a friend—a pick-up, I should say, because she didn't know a soul, let alone anything in pants, when she first landed in this city! Still waters run deep. She said she'd be back by 10 o'clock or so, but whether she means tonight or tomorrow morning, history doesn't relate!"

"Oh fie! You're catty!"

Before Goldie could reply to that the phone rang sharply.

She grabbed the receiver off its hook . . . and listened.

Interest . . . then smiles broke out over her small face.

"Ha! Listens good, old dear! Quite a big idea!"

She put her hand over the mouthpiece, turning to Clive, and said, in a sibilant whisper, though the transmitter was covered: "Our luck's turned! Here's a chance—tonight—to make a whole peck of money!"

CHAPTER XXXII

Goldie de Renze talked into the telephone.

Behind her, among the roses that were wilting in the little slice of a flower shop off Broadway, stood crafty Clive Mortimer, the English "remittance man."

"A party for tonight? You want me to get three charming girls?" gurgled Miss Goldie into the instrument in her best professional manner. "But Smithy dear——" she winked surreptitiously at Clive, "you don't give me time to fix up anything—it's frightfully short notice—it's so late!"

A male voice—throaty—could be heard, protesting, from the other end of the line.

"What's that? Oh! After the theatre? You've three out-of-town customers?" Goldie's accent was italicized—and dubious. "Speak louder. I can't hear you——" she beckoned Clive to come a little closer, so he could "listen in"—"you want blondes—they must be live wires—is that what you say?" Clive nudged his little partner, took the earpiece from her gently, placed his hand over the mouthpiece and said: "What is it, Goldie? What's the proposition? Tell him to hold on a second, whoever he is."

He removed his hand for a moment while she did as she was bid. Then, when he had again cut off the sound of their voices, Goldie excitedly announced: "It's fat little Smithson, wanting to throw a party tonight for three of his best customers! He's a wholesale cloth merchant,

rich as they make 'em—and crazy to stage a good show for their entertainment—he wants blondes!"

"Humph! That sort of a 'gentleman'?" grunted Clive. But his narrow eyes were craftier than ever. "You'll make him pay for his amusement, Goldie. Tell him if he wants you to be hostess, he'll have to loosen up on a stiff price!"

She was distracted, flushed and eager. "Quick—tell me what to say, Clive!"

"What's his idea of the party? Where? When? and how?"

She breathed, hurriedly: "Smithson lives in Westchester County with his wife and kids, but on the quiet he's rented, for a short while, a roof apartment in town. He's asked me up twice. I wouldn't go. I was—afraid. With a crowd it would be different. No one could make trouble after, could they?"

At that, Clive's eyes so narrowed that they almost disappeared in slits, just like a Chinaman!

"No—no. You've got the game into your hands, if you only play it right! Tell him you'll find three girl friends calculated to fairly stun the butter-and-egg men—beauties from the big Broadway shows and accustomed only to the best stuff! Smithson'll have to pay you $100 for the corsage bouquets and the table decorations—white orchids for the girls—American beauties for the centerpiece—tell him you'll have to buy direct in New York—it's too late to get a fresh supply tonight from your Long Island marketman!"

Goldie then spoke into the telephone. All eager as she was to "land" this lucrative "commission," she cleverly contrived to make her voice non-committal, even a little dubious.

"What's that you say? My price is too stiff? Why,

then if you're so cheap, Smithy, take your friends for a pleasant evening to the Bronx Zoo and stage a party with the monkeys and gorillas—but don't waste my time!" This with an air of righteous indignation that was laughable.

Came throaty protests over the wires.

"Huh? I'm to go right ahead then, am I? . . . Oh, just as you say! . . . I'm neutral! . . . Ha! Hum! . . . You're a great little kidder, Smithy"—this in a mollified manner—"Have it your own way!"

Her small hand—the nails so long and sharply pointed that they looked more like claws than anything human—closed again over the mouthpiece.

She whispered sibilantly—"He'll pay the $100 for the flowers——"

"Ask him for cash. No checks! And what about the —er—refreshments—for the guests?"

She spoke again into the instrument.

She listened, winking at Clive. "I've a friend right here who, when it comes to booze, 'knows his onions'! Hold on a second, Smithy!" Then—and this time without closing communication—in a clear and carrying tone: "What's the best you can do in champagne, Clive?"

He took her place. In his clipped, super-refined tones he made his offer. Two cases of genuine Pommery & Greno at $500 was "dirt cheap," he said. He'd got it right off the French boat himself, only this morning! The real stuff—with a marvelous kick!

The wealthy cloth wholesaler, it transpired, did not begrudge his money for good liquor. Clive's little deal was closed immediately.

"What's the address of the apartment? I'll deliver the two cases myself, at half-past eleven. Have payment

ready in cash. No checks in this transaction!" Clive laughed mellifluously.

Goldie then made her final arrangements. She would invite three girl-friends . . . suitable "live-wires." She would assemble the charmers at her own home around eleven-thirty, and the quartet would repair to Smithy's roof apartment subsequently.

The flowers would be sent by messenger at nine o'clock, in time for Mr. Smithson's butler to arrange the table. Mum was the word! No back-chat in the meantime with Marise . . .!

The host-to-be—his mind at rest about the after-theatre entertainment of his most lucrative customers—then rang off, satisfied. Goldie got her various girl friends on the wire.

The "blondes that gentlemen prefer" obligingly complied. . . .

At eleven that night, back in her home on West Fortieth (Marise was at the Harvest Moon . . . Goldie would telephone her there . . . this, luckily, was an "off night" when another "turn" would take the place of Goldie's song-and-dance) there was a ring at the front door . . . Goldie went to answer it. . . .

On the step, and looking very pretty and animated, stood Aleda. A man was with her, talking eagerly—bare-headed—his hat in his hand.

Good God! It couldn't be the same . . .

It was!

The handsome young man who had twice come to the Harvest Moon night club and admired her dancing! . . . the man who had intrigued Goldie's imagination, and—if she possessed such a disturbing organ!—who had caught her heart!

CHAPTER XXXIII

ALEDA sat by the open window of the Long Island inn to which Gary Chester had just brought her and with a heart a-tune to happiness she listened to his voice, surveyed his face.

It was a glorious June evening. This was the first occasion on which he had driven her to a roadhouse. Indeed, it was the first occasion that he had motored her anywhere . . .

Beneath the window shimmered the waters of Long Island Sound. Yachts lay at anchor, just like snowy birds. It was not yet dark, but lights gleamed here and there like brightest jewels on the water, and in the pale blue vault of heaven there hung the crescent of a slim young moon.

"Ah wish a wish, and turn a penny!" breathed Aleda. She felt marvelously thrilled tonight.

Those handsome eyes of Gary Chester held a warm and shiny look.

He flipped a coin upon the table, turned it, laughed and said: "I wish this to be the first of many, many similar occasions! And if a very lovely little lady is enjoying herself only half as much as I, I'll be content."

"But you shouldn't have wished it out aloud. The 'new moon' wish is private——" Her voice was low and sweetly provocative.

He leaned across the tiny table toward her. Oh! pretty

she was, with the evening light upon her hair. The curly tendrils sprayed like ferns across her smooth white forehead, lending mystery and depth to the forget-me-not blue orbs that drew him irresistibly.

"If you only knew the way you look, tonight! If you could just see yourself!"

Softly she laughed, and shyly. Such a beguiling sweetness in her manner! "This little Cinderella is a very ordinary girl!"

"She isn't! She's my fairy princess! I shan't let you miscall the loveliest little lady I have ever met!"

"Ah! flatterer!" Like melting waves on a sunlit shore, like chords of a harp swept in delicious harmony, that voice of his, with its tender notes, caught tightly at her heart.

"I speak the truth. It seems to me that—that—for the first time in my life——" —he was stammering now, so earnest was this Gary—"I've met the one person I always dreamed about—and never hoped to find on earth—the ideal girl——"

Little shivers of joy raced through her nerves. Tears ached at her throat. Could this be heaven, this rustic roadhouse? Angels' voices combined in the deep, tender tones of this one man.

Because of the happiness within her heart she could have cried. She said, in a funny, breathless little way: "With your—your knowledge of the world—and people—it's difficult to credit—that you can really mean—those things."

His hand—a finely modeled hand, with strong brown fingers—closed on hers.

"I've never meant anything so much in all my life before! You can imagine—looking and looking for something—and never finding——" His voice shook with

genuine emotion—"and then, all of a sudden—meeting the girl!"

She thought, deliriously: "Is this a dream? Magic of a Summer evening? Mirage?"

Could it be real? She and this handsome Gary Chester, whom so romantically, yet achingly, she'd thought about, these many lonely days . . . alone together here, just he and she . . . a wonderful three hours of bliss ahead of them . . . his voice . . . those words he spoke . . . a heavenly music in her ears . . .

Intensity of feeling made her silent. With misted eyes and the dream in her heart—his hand gripping hers across the little table—she could only look into those eyes of his, and pray the dream become reality!

* * * * * *

While Goldie, in her tiny flower shop off Broadway, plotted and planned with Clive and Mr. Smithson for an evening's hectic entertainment to amuse the latter's out-of-town customers—promising to supply three "live wires" (plus herself!) who would eat, dance and make merry, and be fascinating—Aleda dined with Gary Chester in the quaint Long Island inn.

Honeysuckle peered in at the open window. Instead of jazz, the orchestra was playing, very softly, operatic airs. They were sympathetic and romantic Latins, these performers. As their fingers swept the strings of violin and 'cello and the notes of the piano, their dark eyes traveled with respectful interest to the couple in the corner who were so absorbed in one another.

They were talking earnestly together now.

"I've always thought I was a bit dull—by that, I mean, old-fashioned," Aleda was explaining. "I'm not keen on late, rowdy parties, or a lot of people all together, or

cabaret shows. I so enjoy a tete-a-tete when you're with a person who really interests you——"

"As now?" Gary Chester raised his finely penciled brows. There was a pleading, and at the same time a happy eagerness in his fine eyes that clearly showed his feeling for this girl.

Aleda thrilled to that warm query.

"I—I love this evening—every bit of it! It—if you only knew how unusual it is for me—to go out alone and dine with anybody—and of course New York and its surroundings being so new, and all——"

"So that's it?" He made a comic, rueful face. "It's just the novelty? The company counts for nothing——?"

She gave the strong brown hand that held hers an impulsive little-girl pressure, unconscious that she did so, but anxious to set things right.

"There isn't anybody I'd sooner be with! I'm as—as happy as a queen! Oh, Mr. Chester——!"

"Make it 'Gary'!"

"Isn't it—too soon? I mean—oh, I'm so stupid!—not a bit like the girls you're accustomed to—but you see I haven't really gone out a lot or met people, and I want you to—to *respect* me—and not get an idea that I call people by their names right away before I've got to *know* them——" She spoke breathlessly, her face sweetly shy.

"So I'm just 'people'? You're quite right. You don't understand me yet." And then he added, very softly, very gently: "Miss Aleda, think what *you* like but already I have set *you* on a pedestal!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

"THE sly beast! The two-faced cat! She's double-crossed me! I hate her!" Goldie de Renze told herself excitedly when, at 11 P.M., she opened the front door of the house on West Fortieth Street at Aleda's ring and found Aleda with the handsome, gentlemanly young man who had twice come to the night club, and whom Goldie —who didn't even know his name—had ached so yearningly to see again!

Who was he? An acquaintance of the Countess Dellamanca—she knew that.

But how on earth had Aleda grabbed him—Aleda whom Goldie had hitherto considered so mouse-like and so negligible?

"He's been back at the Harvest Moon, and she's made up to him on the sly, with never a word to me!" Goldie could have clawed Aleda at this moment of furious jealousy and suspicion. "I described him to her, fool that I was! I aroused her interest! She put two and two together—watched and waited for him—and now she's got him for herself!"

Seeing him standing there on the top doorstep of her home so utterly absorbed in gazing at Aleda that he didn't even give one glance in her direction, it did seem as though Aleda had fascinated him! Even when Aleda, in her breathless, musical young voice, said hastily, by way of introduction. "This is my friend, Miss de Renze, whom

I'm staying with," he merely gave the vaguest bow without one sign of recognition toward the red-haired damsel in the doorway, and went right on talking to the other girl!

This was too much. After the first shock had passed, but still furiously resentful, Goldie, leaving the door half open, retired a step or two into the semi-dark lobby and surveyed the couple through the crack!

"I can never thank you enough for coming!" the handsome young man (on whose interest Goldie considered she had a special option) was saying to Aleda.

"It's been simply wonderful!" affirmed the girl.

"Has it, indeed?" mimicked Goldie, watching, and extremely spiteful. That look in the eyes—so deferential, yet so full of genuine ardor—of which Aleda at this moment was the recipient, had certainly never been turned on her by any man!

"It's been the happiest evening of my life!" averred the young fellow, with a boyish emphasis. He held Aleda's hand in his, as though reluctant to part with it—or her! "I can only tear myself away if you promise—promise that very soon there will be a repetition. Let's make it a bargain. What do you say?"

She laughed. That little laugh of hers was low and musical. It was one of Aleda's greatest charms, did she but know.

To Gary Chester it was utterly alluring. He had the greatest difficulty at that moment to keep himself from taking her in his arms!

To jealous Goldie, the Broadway "gamine," watching through the crack of the door, the spell that he was under was quite obvious. Goldie, herself a creature of impulse but at the same time shrewd and calculating, had a certain intuition about men—and life.

"If you want to find me you can call me, either here or at the office," said Aleda gently.

"And if you want me—please give me a ring at any time—I'd be immensely pleased and flattered!—message will always get me at the Yale Club!"

Goldie stepped back into the darkened living room as Aleda—having bid her cavalier goodnight—came through the door and into the hall.

"Goldie! Hi, there! Where are you?" There was a gay lilt in Aleda's voice.

With a hop, step and jump the red-haired damsel was over by the windows, pretending to be busy with the fastenings.

"I'm here—shutting up shop. Come on in and relate your dizzy adventure! The simple country maid's stepped forth."

"Oh, Goldie, he's so—charming! He took me in his car out on Long Island. It's beautiful out there. We had dinner in the sweetest little restaurant!"

(Thought Goldie: I don't believe she guesses he was the man I was raving about!)

"That so?" Her voice was cool and even. The darkness of the living room hid her face. "Quite an Adonis, huh? I've got to hand it to you! What's the beloved one's name, might I ask?"

"He's—just a friend. His name is Gary Chester. He's very clever. Works for my boss. He's an engineer."

A scheme—a daring scheme, born of revenge and jealousy, plus the queer attraction the young fellow had exercised unwittingly on Goldie—rapidly evolved in her shrewd mind.

"Want to do a little favor for me, dear?" She came out of the darkness towards Aleda. The latter saw that

Goldie was in evening dress. "I need a fifth girl for tonight for an awfully cheery party that a friend of mine is giving. One of the guests dropped out and I can't stir up a substitute at this late hour. You'll come, won't you, Aleda?"

"Oh, I couldn't." The girl drew back. Such a magic evening with Gary Chester—she wanted to go straight to bed—to be alone and dream about the enchanted hours.

"Say 'yes'! I'm in a hole!" coaxed Goldie.

"No, no. You ask Marise. She'll go instead."

With swift acumen Goldie went to the phone and called her sister, whom she knew would be quite unable to leave the Harvest Moon. She spoke in muffled tones into the instrument. Aleda could not hear what Goldie said. And then the latter beckoned to her. "Marise can't get away. She wants to speak to you."

Aleda took the receiver, heard Marise imploring her to accompany Goldie as a chaperon!

"I hate these parties, but Goldie's set on going! I've so much confidence in you, Aleda, my mind will be relieved if I know you're there! You go with Goldie to this party and keep a sharp watch on her and bring her back early! Do this, dear, for my sake!"

What could Aleda do, but reluctantly acquiesce?

And while she was slipping on a simple little frock, upstairs, Goldie, on a battered old typewriter belonging to one of the other "roomers," wrote the following note:

"Gary, ole dear . . . come on and join us at a party on the roof of 0072 Madison Avenue. I would just love to have you come. Love from Aleda."

She addressed an envelope, put the missive in it, telephoned for a messenger, and when he came, said briefly: "Take this to Mr. Gary Chester at the Yale Club."

CHAPTER XXXV

At half past eleven at night Goldie de Renze, accompanied by three giggling, highly decorated beauties whose general get-up was really startling, pushed Aleda into a taxi-cab.

"Come on! Don't be a spoil-sport!"

"Don't throw a monkey-wrench into the works!"

"This way for little Smithson's show!"

Smithson! As the taxi ricocheted and bounced on its way towards "the party," Aleda whispered to Goldie apprehensively: "Surely it isn't the same Mr. Smithson who tried to tip me five dollars at the Harvest Moon Club?"

"Aw, what of it? You forget it, kid! You're out for a good time!"

Before Aleda's eyes arose a vision of the rotund, middle-aged, bald-headed man who (to her mind) had so insulted her by offering money for her services as dance-partner!

It couldn't be the same. This man was married. Had a lot of children. Lived in the country up Westchester way!

She felt nervous about this party. Like a fish out of water—that would be her role!

But with the memory of Gary Chester's parting words and look and handclasp—how she had thrilled to the enchanting hours she'd spent with him this evening!—nothing could really cast her down tonight, happen what may.

She was barely conscious of the Broadway beauties' chatter. Aleda forgot the party. She was wrapped in a high and happy mood.

They reached their destination. The giggling girls poured out of the taxi, crossed the foyer of the apartment building, got into the elevator and were shot up to the roof.

A negro butler awaited their arrival. An inscrutable expression on his face, he took their wraps.

Loud salutations came from a long and low-ceilinged living room. Mr. Smithson—the very man whom Aleda had so disliked at their previous meeting—darted forward, and with a girl on either arm, and shooing the others in front of him, presented each, in turn, to his out-of-town customers.

There was crackling repartee—tremendous joviality. Goldie, in highest fettle, executed a few dance steps. She cried: "Meet the shepherdess and her sheep!"

"Ba! Ba!" bleated Mr. Smithson, waving pudgy arms.

"The lambs to the slaughter!" chortled a "butter-and-egg" man. "Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"I'm the wolf in the fold! Watch out!" exclaimed another, delighted with his own witticism, and baring a vista of gold-filled teeth. He made a playful grab at Goldie, who eluded him. It was evident he had already "looked upon the wine when it was red."

"A cocktail—quick—to save me!" plaintively wailed a tow-headed maid.

"The lady's slightest wish is granted!" chanted little Smithson, waving on high a shaker, then pouring portions into glasses on which were painted a rampant bird. "Come on, everybody! This'll put a kick into proceedings."

One of his friends came forward towards Aleda, holding the tray.

"No, thanks!" She shook her head.

At the same moment came a sharp pinch on the arm from Goldie. "Don't be a little prude and a spoil-sport!"

She flushed. With a determined jerk that spilled some of the mixture on Aleda's frock, Goldie handed the brimming glass to her. "You drink—quick—or I'll make a fool of you in front of the whole crowd!"

A palm grew in a tub immediately behind Aleda. She took the glass with shaking fingers, and a few seconds later, when attention was diverted from her, she emptied its contents at the base of the plant.

Goldie came up—saw the flushed face—the empty cup—and murmured in a mollified tone: "Atta girl!"

Aleda moved off from her, to an open window giving on the roof. She wanted air—a long, deep breath.

There was a second round of cocktails. This time Aleda was left unmolested. Then the negro butler, in a sonorous voice, announced: "Supper is served."

At the same moment he drew back a heavy curtain that divided a brick-floored platform or dais from the living room.

There were ecstatic "Ah's!" and "Oh's!" from the female element, as a candle-lighted and beautifully decorated table, laden with all sorts of viands, was revealed.

In each girl's place reposed a lovely spray of delicate white orchids, tied with satin ribbon. There was a magnificent centerpiece of American beauties, and trails of smilax ran the length of the table and criss-crossed, revealing here and there a deep red rose.

Metal-banded tubs of ice from which projected long-necked bottles carrying gold labels stood upon a little

wagon. Mr. Smithson conducted his guests to the feast, took the head of the table, and, as he termed it, "the fun was on!"

It wasn't fun to poor Aleda. She felt very ill at ease, and—somehow—afraid.

She felt still more apprehensive when, lifting her napkin to the tune of excited feminine exclamations and shouts of appreciation, she discovered—as did each girl at the party—a small vanity case containing a fifty-dollar note!

CHAPTER XXXVI

CLIVE MORTIMER had delivered two cases of champagne at the roof apartment just before the party.

"Cash payment was arranged for. No checks," he said to the negro butler when his goods were dumped in the kitchenette.

"Just wait a moment, suh. I'll call Mr. Briggs."

"Mr. Briggs! Who's Mr. Briggs?" In this transaction Clive had heard of nobody but Mr. Smithson—friend of Goldie—the host.

"Mr. Briggs is my master, suh. This is his apartment." The servant vanished. And presently none other than Smithson—whom Clive had seen once and now immediately recognized—came into the room.

"Ah!" He poked and ferreted among the bottles. "This looks like genuine stuff! What is the price?"

"Five hundred dollars," tartly said Clive.

"Hum! Pretty steep! Aren't you piling it on a bit?"

The Englishman was nettled. "Five hundred dollars or nothing. That was the agreed rate. And I want cash settlement. No checks. We fixed all that on the phone."

"Of course. Of course." This in a mollifying tone. Smithson flung a furtive look over his back. It was almost as though the latter were afraid that someone else had come with Clive . . . "Or maybe he's scared of prohibition agents," thought the Englishman.

In a neat packet, held by a band, Mr. Smithson handed him fifty $10 bills.

Clive counted them, said briefly, "That's in order," and turned to depart.

As he did so, he heard the butler say to Smithson: "Mr. Briggs, suh, I've laid covers for eight."

Mr. Briggs again!

The meaning of it flashed on Clive.

"That little runt has rented this apartment on the sly under a fake name, so he can have jolly times up here without his wife finding out!"

The crafty eyes narrowed calculatingly. Here, tumbled into his hand most providentially, was yet another source of income (he wouldn't give its rightful name of blackmail, for that wasn't pretty). He'd wring "hush money" out of silly little Smithson, squeeze, through this unexpected knowledge, the so-called Briggs to the last cent!

* * * * * *

The party was growing gayer and noisier every moment. Over the loaded table, orchid-decked maidens flung provocative glances at the "butter-and-egg" men.

Only Aleda was distrait and silent and afraid.

This hateful termination to her magic evening with the one Gary Chester! She could have wept over the anti-climax.

Goldie was half intoxicated. She had been indulging freely in champagne, and was now giving vent to what she termed "wise cracks."

"If I could only get her home—quick!" thought Aleda, her mind full of the understanding with Marise.

Some wine was spilled upon the table. The whole thing was so distasteful to Aleda that it even seemed that already the American beauties had a wilted look! They

hung their delicate heads as though in shame of what they witnessed. But the human American beauties did not act that way. They became broader and more provocative in their sallies. The heads of two of them reposed brazenly on middle-aged male shoulders.

"Now comes the 'piece de resistance' of the party!" exclaimed Goldie, suddenly jumping up. She signed to the girls to accompany her—Aleda followed and they all went out into the bedroom.

"We'll put on these and give the old boys a great thrill!" Goldie fumbled with unsteady fingers at the wrappings of a package she had brought with her.

"These,"—to Aleda's astonishment and horror—proved to be several sets of pajamas! Goldie tossed her a pair.

"You wouldn't, Goldie! Come right home!" Aleda caught her arm.

"O—oh! Kill-joy! Prunes and prisms!" jeered Goldie mockingly.

"You wouldn't let her?" Aleda appealed to the other girls.

Loud giggles were the only comment, and a "Goldie, your friend sure is early Victorian!"

"I'm respectable! I've got a little decent pride in myself! It's horrible—these old men, leering like satyrs." A sob caught in her throat.

Goldie seemed momentarily sobered. She said, coaxingly: "Come off it, Aleda! Don't high-hat us! It's only a joke!"

"It isn't! It's beastly!" Aleda was beside herself. Leaving them there in the bedroom she ran through the hallway to the elevator and pressed the button frantically. But no lift came up!

She waited, her finger still on the bell-push.

"Don't make an idiot of yourself! Come on back!" Goldie appeared at her side.

"I'm going home! I wouldn't stay another minute!" The forget-me-not blue eyes were angry and wide.

Goldie's mood changed. She tossed her head. "Ring all you like, the elevator boy has got his instructions not to take anybody down from the roof!"

"Then where's the exit? Nothing will keep me here. Goldie, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Goldie's eyes took on a cunning look. Her mind worked swiftly. That trick of the note written in Aleda's name to Gary Chester was too crude. The game would be discovered. Now, at this moment—to remedy her error—came her chance.

"Calm yourself, dear. Quit planning suicide by jumping off the roof to save outraged modesty, and such old stuff! I'll call your Gary Chester at his club and get him to come right up here and fetch both of us home."

Before Aleda could prevent her, she had darted to the telephone.

The club-porter informed her that Mr. Chester had just a few minutes ago left the club.

Ah! That was great! Her trick would be adequately covered. She fibbed to Aleda blithely: "Everything's O. K. Your guardian angel's coming right up."

Fifteen minutes later Gary Chester was ushered into the middle of the party, rowdier than ever now. He went directly to Aleda and said, in a stiff, strange tone: "I got the message. I came at once."

As she looked into that disapproving face which only a few hours ago held such tender warmth for her, her heart sank wretchedly and no words came.

CHAPTER XXXVII

GARY CHESTER—tricked by Goldie into arriving at the scene of Mr. Smithson's (alias Briggs') hectic party in the roof apartment—confronted Aleda in an astonished dismay.

From the moment he had received the typewritten note sent to the Yale Club, beginning: "Gary ole dear," and signed "Aleda," he had experienced a chilling sense of disappointment and misgiving that now, at this moment, was further borne out. . . .

That note had been so "cheap" . . . had shown so easy a familiarity, that it had startled him. It was so utterly out of keeping with the shy, woodland sweetness and reserve and dignity of the young girl who had so fascinated him a few hours back! So contrary to his conception of her character!

That the missive had been written and dispatched by another and that Aleda was totally ignorant of the trick, did not occur to him.

He understood that she had asked him to come here, and—despite his misgiving—her attraction was so strong that it had drawn him to the spot.

It was a Bacchanalian scene. On a low divan in the long living room (someone had disconnected several of the lamps, and the lighting was sketchy—uncertain) a middle-aged man with rumpled hair and collar held on his lap—giggling, protesting and making a coquettish show

of struggling—a young girl. Another couple sat with their arms frankly entwined about each other, sipping alternately out of the same glass.

An electric piano hammered out a very jazzy air. Smithson—alias Briggs—the host, was tugging at Aleda's arm, and plaintively and—due to excess of alcohol—thickly, murmuring—"C'mon! Le'sh dance! Wanna pu'sh my arm roun' you 'gain! Don't be sh'tandoffish!"

Aleda's cheeks were scarlet. A strand of her pretty hair had come unloosened, as though she had recently been in a skirmish. A great splash of red wine—it smelled like port!—was all down the front of her frock. (He could not know that Goldie, making it seem like an accident, had purposely done this deed!)

Speechless for a moment, Gary's eye rested on the crushed, expensive orchids pinned in the bosom of Aleda's gown. Somehow, broken and flattened, yet at the same time curling wickedly, like greedy, waxen fingers, they gave the last touch of dissipation to the appearance of the girl. Dancing with her to this hateful music, which one—or was it all—of these middle-aged roues (Gary's glance shot furiously around the scene) had been holding Aleda in a bear-like embrace?

He felt like murder! He felt as though all his castles in Spain . . . his dreams . . . had toppled down!

The disordered supper table—array of bottles—a couple of smashed glasses—the maudlin behavior of some of the guests—(a fat man with a rose behind his ear and a rose held in his teeth was trying to give an elephantine tango solo)—bore witness to the kind of an affair this was!

Aleda—forget-me-not blue eyes unnaturally bright—(he did not attribute their brilliance to tears that lurked

so near the surface!) delicate pink cheeks an unbecoming crimson—could this be the same "ideal girl" whose shy and beguiling modesty he had worshiped a few hours back?

"I got your message. I came," he repeated, like an automaton.

And at that moment a red-haired little gamin of a girl who—for the second time that day!—had watched him through the crack of a door—and calculated—ran forward, oh! so girlishly, albeit piquantly, and caught him by the arm and drew him out of earshot, whispering rapidly:—"If you're any friend of Aleda's, take her right home! She doesn't know how to take care of herself! I've been worried sick——"

There was something familiar in her red-gold curls, the tip-tilted little nose, the elfin face.

"Haven't I met you somewhere?" Gary asked.

Goldie gave him a provocative glance from her green eyes. It was not too bold or too "come hither-ish!" She had "got his number." He wouldn't care for blatancy. She was a shrewd young miss.

"If you come to the Harvest Moon tomorrow night, maybe you'll remember?" Then, urgently, and before he had time to answer: "You take Aleda home! I can't persuade her! She's not herself tonight—I only came here to keep an eye on her—she's awfully strong-headed—but maybe she'll mind what you say?"

The elfin little figure, one finger to her lips to enjoin silence, flitted away.

Gary, his mind full of disturbing cross currents, approached Aleda. He said, briefly, and with no preamble: "I'm here to take you home."

The host made violent protest. He followed the pair to the elevator, arguing volubly.

When they gained the street, Gary—with disturbed glances at the flushed and silent Aleda—helped her into his car.

He let in the clutch, trod on the accelerator and the machine sprang forward.

"I—I—it was good of you—to come—I'm frightfully sorry——" She was stammering in her humiliation—and afraid. Why on earth had Goldie telephoned the last man in the world she would wish to see her in such company? Even if she *had* been frightened, what on earth had possessed the other girl?

Aleda did not know that Goldie's phone-call had not reached its object. Aleda knew nothing of Goldie's "cheap," familiar letter to this man, forged in her own name.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"I DON'T like it at all! I—I'm awfully—uneasy, Clive!"

The nightly show was finished at the Harvest Moon, and in one of the quaint little alcoves cut in the wall, and over the gold fish that were swimming in the illuminated glass table between them, Marise de Renze's anxious eyes fastened on the Englishman.

"Calamity Jane!" he teased. "Marise is too gay a name for you!" In his faultlessly-fitting dinner jacket Clive lolled back.

"This party Goldie's gone off on! These wild times, Clive! They're terrible for a young girl!"

"And what about an older girl?" He smiled in his cool, imperturbable fashion. "To use one of your own elegant expressions, don't you yourself get quite a kick out of life?"

"Not lately. Not——" —Marise's voice trembled, "not in a long time——"

He raised his brows. He hoped the foolish creature wasn't going to take him to task for neglect of her. Women of her age—especially if unmarried—could, if sentimental (and all of them were infernally romantic, he had found) become an awful pest!

"There's this flower shop, too, that Goldie spends so much of her time in!" Marise's eyelashes fluttered. "I've just heard about it, Clive. Oh, maybe they were only kidding. But they said—they said——"

He took his cigarette from his lips and gave her an irritated glance. There was disquiet in the twitching of his thin, well-shaped nostrils.

"What did they say? Why must you women forever make mountains out of molehills?"

She gulped: "They said the flowers were only a blind! The shop was a—a sort of a rendezvous—that people could get letters sent there that they wouldn't want delivered at their own homes! That out-of-town men who wanted a good time could drop in, and Goldie would get in touch with her girl friends and arrange meetings—and parties——"

Clive forced a laugh. That laugh rang hollow. It was intended—to be amused and teasing—to ridicule Marise back into a state of unsuspiciousness. He didn't want Marise to pry into his private business, nor to put an untimely check on the little sister's activities that were going to prove so very lucrative to himself.

"You mean that the little flower shop's a matrimonial agency, eh?"

"Or—worse?" The tremulo was again in Marise's voice. "Oh, Goldie wouldn't understand what she was doing! She's so sociable and gay and thoughtless, she'd think it was great fun introducing people to each other, and—and watching developments! She wouldn't guess the danger back of it, the—the complications! Sometimes, at nights——" Marise choked for a moment—"I stay awake for hours, worrying over the sort of a life that Goldie may be getting into,—and she so unaware!"

Her eyes were like those of a piteous child. Her lips and hands were shaking.

"Come! Don't be so foolishly imaginative, Marise!"

"I'm not! This town—you know it! It's chock full of pitfalls for a young girl!"

"You talk like a Sunday school teacher!"

"I talk like someone who loves her sister, and wants to see her decently married to an honest man, and make something out of her life!"

"Well, maybe the flower shop will help her to that end, who knows?" He blew a ring of smoke from his cigarette. "If you keep Goldie cloistered like a nun, her chances won't be many. Let the girl have an opportunity of meeting men and getting offers——"

"Behaving like this, only the wrong kind of offers will come Goldie's way! You know it as well as I do. That isn't the right kind of a life!"

"Well, what can I do? D'you want me to propose marriage to the child?" There was sarcasm in the refined voice, a quizzical gleam in the closely set eyes.

Marise drew a sharp breath. She murmured: "It isn't so long ago that you were telling me you cared for—for me, Clive?"

There was pain on her face, a heartache in that little stabbing sigh of hers.

He caught it. With a sudden change of manner he leaned across the lighted table in the alcove, towards her. "You're the silliest girl in the world, Marise—with your suspicions! You know it's you—and only you—I've always been crazy about!"

She smiled, through tears. "I'm not jealous. At heart you're a good fellow, Clive. Women have spoiled you, but I do—I do believe you care—for me—a little bit?"

"Then stop this worrying!" He gave her hand a quick, ardent pressure.

But she reverted to the original subject. That was the worst of women . . . willy-nilly, he must keep his temper with her and not give the game away, thought Clive.

"I found a whole wad of dollars in Goldie's pocketbook! Where on earth could they have come from?"

"Don't make a fuss, Marise! I lent them to the child!"

"You?" She seemed startled and dubious. Clive owed her a bill for board—it was long overdue—and there had been other "loans". . . .

He reddened, reading her mind. He said hastily: "You say you want Goldie to find a good husband? Between ourselves, I think she's set on that good-looking fellow who came here with the titled woman—Countess Dellamanca—he seemed very taken with Goldie. She told me if only she could afford better clothes, she'd maybe have a chance of marrying the right man—someone she was 'crazy about'!"

At this explanation, Marise's face lightened. She said, eagerly: "I remember him. Don't know his name, but I'll ask Goldie. I heard he was very clever and steady—and he looked a thorough gentleman, and—and exactly the right sort! Oh, Clive, do you really think—it would be so splendid if he should come to care for Goldie? It was kind of you to help."

He grinned: "Suppose I am running a private matrimonial agency for Goldie, what on earth are you kicking about?"

* * * * * *

They ate bacon and eggs, the harmony restored between them. Marise's fears anent the little sister were allayed. Her thoughts reverted to this gentlemanly admirer—Goldie's future—it would be too wonderful to see her settled and safe, and out of this Broadway crowd——

"It's after two. I must be getting along back home, and see if Goldie's back." She left the Harvest Moon

and soon was on the steps of the house on West Fortieth Street.

As she was fitting her key into the lock, up to the curb slid a long, low-slung car. Aleda and a tall young man got out, came towards the steps. She heard the young man say, an eager tenseness in his voice: "If you would dine with me tomorrow evening, we could talk the matter out?"

Marise swung about. Light from a street lamp fell upon the couple. She recognized at once the same young man on whom she had just been building castles for her sister——

Aleda (resentment flamed in Marise's heart for Goldie!) Aleda had "got" the man whom poor little Goldie was "crazy about!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

"I THINK it's horrible of you! I wouldn't have believed it! I—I liked you so! I trusted you!" It was after two in the morning, Marise had followed Aleda to her bedroom and was haranguing the girl.

In her ruined evening frock with its wilted orchids Aleda faced Marise. She was not cognizant of the real reason of this display of temper. She didn't for a moment connect Gary Chester with Marise's wrath.

"If you think I had a good time, you're mightily mistaken!" Aleda put her chin in the air. "I only did what you wanted, and instead of being indignant with me, it's the other way round . . . I should be very angry with you, Marise!"

Marise's mouth fell open.

"Well, of all the nerve!"

"You're right!" Aleda, though outwardly dignified, was trembling at the injustice of the attack. "There was a great deal of nerve in getting me to go to such a place —and not even for you, Marise, will I ever do such a thing a second time!"

That was a facer.

"What was the matter with the party? Why didn't you stick by Goldie as you promised to do?"

"Goldie?" Aleda's lip curled, all unconsciously. "Why didn't Goldie stick by me, you ought to ask? What does

she want, dragging me to such an—such an orgy? 'Party,' indeed! I call it a—a debauch!"

A sudden anxiety mingled with the anger on Marise's face. She said, in a staccato voice, "What's that you say? Where's Goldie? Why didn't she come home with you? Why did you take her young man away from her? Is Goldie—safe?"

"'Take her young man away from her'?" repeated Aleda, mystified. She stared at the speaker in the belief that she was crazy!

"Yes. Don't pretend. It was a shabby trick. But before we go into that, you tell me—quick——" —Marise had Aleda by the elbow, and was almost shaking her, in her swift dread—"is Goldie all right? No one—nothing —was harming her?"

"No one except herself," replied Aleda frigidly. "But if you think it's correct for an eighteen-year old girl—or any girl—to go on a drinking party where there isn't even a hostess, and be the plaything of men old enough to be her father—and probably all married, too—I don't."

Marise flared up: "You know as well as I do, that I didn't want Goldie to go at all! But I thought when you were chaperoning her, the least you could do was stay with her—or take her away——"

"Chaperoning her? Why! I'm only a year or two older than Goldie herself!"

"You had the obligation! You left her! You wanted to be off with her young man!"

This was too much.

"If you mean Mr. Chester, who brought me home just now (and I was horribly ashamed that he should ever see me amid such a hateful crew at that roof apartment!) I tell you that Goldie never met him until tonight! I've known him for some time. I dined with him this evening

on Long Island. Goldie opened the front door at 11 o'clock when he brought me home from our motor ride. I said: 'This is my friend, Miss de Renze, whom I'm staying with. . . .'" she paused.

Urged Marise: "Go on. What happened? What did he say to that?"

"I don't remember, except that he wasn't looking at Goldie. He was looking directly at me, and—and giving me another invitation! The door was ajar when I said goodnight to him, and Goldie had gone into the living room."

"They didn't speak to each other?" queried the older woman, sharply.

"No. Why should they? But Goldie overheard him give me his address, and when I wanted to run away from the party, and the elevator wasn't working, and I got alarmed, she phoned him at his club. He came. He took me home."

"And neither he nor you suggested bringing Goldie with you?" Marise's throat was working like an angry rooster. Then she blurted out: "Don't you realize that he's the man who came to the Harvest Moon and flirted so with Goldie? Don't you know that he's the man she is so crazy about?"

* * * * * *

After the storm, and alone at last, Aleda—with shaking fingers—removed her wine-stained frock, flung the dilapidated orchids out the window, removed the rest of her garments, turned off the light and got into bed.

Marise's shrill accusations were still ringing through her head.

She'd leave this house tomorrow morning. No one would ever talk to her in that way a second time!

Unjust! Untrue! And utterly ridiculous!

As though Gary Chester—even if he had gone to the Harvest Moon—had ever given poor little Goldie de Renze two thoughts!

"She must have recognized him when he brought me home earlier tonight in his car, and she was piqued because he didn't look at her!" Aleda tried to reason out Goldie's subsequent action in calling Gary to the roof apartment on the telephone. "Was that just a trick of hers to get in touch with him again, or humiliate me in front of him, or both?"

Had Goldie invited her—Aleda—to the party tonight, with mischief-making intent to act just in this way?

She was ashamed of her suspicions, but she did not—in the light of Marise's accusations—trust this girl.

She would have trusted her still less had she had any inkling of the forged missive Goldie had sent, signed in Aleda's name!

Aleda was under the definite impression that when Gary had said to her: "I got your message," he was referring to the telephone call. He had left his club before Miss Goldie phoned him. How distressed Aleda would have been—and most indignant had she but glimpsed that secret note!

CHAPTER XL

ALEDA slept fitfully. In the small, hot bedroom in Marise's house on West Fortieth Street—dreaming that Marise was still scolding her and blaming her for stealing Goldie's beau, one Gary Chester—Aleda moaned and stirred.

That hateful party in the roof apartment!

In her dreams the scenes were re-enacted, magnified, italicized!

She woke and found to her astonishment that she was weeping!

Had it been real, or had she dreamed that Gary had said, in parting:

"This is goodbye. I don't ever wish to see you again."

She brushed her hand across her eyes, sat up in bed. It wasn't six yet—she could see the little traveling clock upon her dressing table—yet some daylight had already percolated into the room.

Upon a chair—a reminder of the detestable party of but a few hours ago!—lay the wine-stained frock!

What had he thought, this Gary Chester, on whose good opinion she had set such store?

Then she remembered she had given an explanation to him on the journey back. . . .

Had he believed her? He had been silent, "distrait" and cool.

Despite her feeling for him, and the ache in her heart,

she had grown angry, then, and told him that he was hard and unjust! She realized he thought she had been drinking . . . like the other girls!

She had exclaimed indignantly, just like a spoiled and foolish child: "Because I was dragged against my will into the wrong crowd, and wine was spilled on my frock —although I hadn't touched a drop of it!—and a lot of silly old men went on like idiots. I'm to be treated like an—like an outcast or a leper—by someone I'd begun to look on as a friend—a—a dear friend! It serves me right! This is the first and last party, believe me, which I'll ever go out on!"

He had helped her from the car, at that, and taken her to Marise's door.

In a low, hurt voice—quite tense—he'd made a suggestion (overheard no doubt by Goldie's sister, and that had added to the general trouble!): "If you will dine with me tomorrow evening, we could talk the matter out?"

She had not given a "yes" or "no." She had gone quickly up the steps.

He'd gone.

Then came Marise's accusations! Unjust and ridiculous, they had been!

She'd leave this house forever! She would be extraordinarily cool to Gary Chester . . . Goldie could have him . . . he must have flirted in some way with Goldie . . . she hated a lady-killing man, a he-male vamp!

As Aleda started to get out of bed and put her resolution to leave into action—(she would do her packing now, before anyone was about . . . and leave a note for Marise with the entire week's board-money, though it was only Wednesday . . . and go right out of the house, and the expressman would call later and fetch her trunk

. . . this would be the easiest and the most dignified exit!)—she heard a tiny sound, a rustle, at the half-open door of her room.

Nerves still keyed up, she gave a quick, staccato: "Who's there?"

Around the edge of the door appeared Marise's head.

"Aleda . . . let me speak to you . . . I haven't slept a wink all night!"

"What is it?" Aleda pulled the coverlets back over her and stared at the white-faced, red-eyed vision that was Marise. "I thought you'd already said everything that was to be said?"

"I'm—*terribly* sorry, Aleda! I'd give my right hand—cut out my tongue—if you'd only see your way to—to *overlook* things? I was so frightened and worried about Goldie—and you coming home without her was the last straw!"

Marise was in the room now, her hand nervously playing with the door-knob. She looked ill and wretched, pallid and pathetic. Her face, like the kimono that she wore, seemed faded and old.

A twinge of compunction for this woman touched Aleda. Angry as she had been with her last night—or early this morning, during their distressing interview, she now felt a qualm of pity for Marise.

She forced herself, however, to hide that. She said: "I'm packing immediately. You won't have much difficulty in renting this room."

Two tears coursed slowly down Marise's face.

"I don't blame you for going, and I can't keep you against your wish, but—oh, Aleda!—if you only knew how much I've liked you—what a pleasure and—and a comfort it's been to have you here!" She gulped. "Goldie didn't get in till half past three or four, and when

I saw her——" —Marise's voice trembled—"I realized how right you were! If only——" —she sat down wearily on the end of Aleda's bed—"if only you'd forgive me, and stay on, and—and be friendly with Goldie —or at least with me, because I think the world of you—it would be such a relief to my mind."

In the half light of the room, Aleda could see that Marise's eyes were like those of a tired but faithful dog who pleads for a little kindness and a little mercy.

She couldn't hold out against her at this moment. She said, in an uncertain, rather shaky voice: "Oh, in the meantime . . . for a little while . . . I'll stay. . . ."

That morning, dressing at his club, Gary Chester found on the floor beside the chair on which his coat had rested overnight, a small bright object.

It must have fallen from his pocket. He had no idea what it could be . . .

He picked it up, examined it.

The little shiny lid sprang open, revealing rouge and powder, covered by tiny circles of tissue paper. Secured on the inside of the lid by an elastic band was a folded, brand-new $50 bill!

How on earth had this thing come into his possession?

Ah! he remembered now—the red-haired girl at the roof apartment party had slipped something into his pocket as he was waiting for Aleda, whispering: "She's a bit fuddled now—you understand—a man gave her this —tonight—you keep it for her till she knows what she's about!"

CHAPTER XLI

ALEDA donned a frock of cool blue linen.

She had slept badly during the night, and as she looked at herself in the mirror of her bedroom, she saw that her face was pale, and there were violet shadows under her eyes.

Her skin had a gardenia transparency. There was a tired droop to the long white throat.

Another day! Would Gary Chester call her? Or would he drop into the office to see Lingard, and stop at her desk to arrange for their evening's rendezvous?

Did he really want to see her? When he had suggested a dinner together for tonight, why hadn't she given a quick assent, and there and then arranged the "when" and "where"?

Finding her at the hateful roof apartment party, there had been an astonished dismay in his fine eyes! She had fallen from her pedestal! Might it be that "not all the king's horses nor all the king's men" could ever set Aleda back on that pedestal again?

The thought was torture.

WHY did this man's good opinion matter so to her?

Could this be LOVE, this fluttering torment? Could it be LOVE that made her lips so white, and her hands shake?

She took a stick of lip-salve from a little tray upon her

bureau, and executed—quite in the Dellamanca or Dolores manner—a red curve.

Other women wanted him—badly. Even if a little paint meant "stooping to conquer," she would use their weapons—fight in the same way.

But she put no touch of color on the gardenia-white cheeks. Like that, the lips so vivid and provocative, the eyes with the violet shadows under them looked all the bluer. There was an appealing wistfulness in the black-lashed depths.

Was love worth all the suffering it could entail, she wondered. Would last night's happenings really make a break between them? Her heart was full of a fluttering disquiet.

With shaking hands she took from its tissue wrappings her one extravagance, a new hat. It was of pale blue straw, the color of her frock, and large and picturesquely droopy. On the edge of the wide brim reposed a yellow water-lily. Simple, and yet extraordinarily effective—she had paid $6 for it in a little slit of a shop on Seventh Avenue—it gave a French touch to her modest toilette.

"Will he see me in it?" Despite her fears, her thoughts soared.

She stole out of the house without waiting for her breakfast. It was early yet. She wanted to avoid the possibility of running into Goldie (though no doubt Goldie would be slumbering on for hours, in her usual fashion) or an encounter with Marise.

She wished she had not promised to stay on in this place——

She wished that she had done her packing, as planned, and was now free to leave——

Goldie, infatuated with Gary Chester, who hadn't even recognized her!

Marise, jealous for Goldie's happiness, and cackling and fussing over her chicken like an infuriated hen!

It was too impossible, this absurd situation, and this contretemps!

Yet pity had touched her heart at sight of the broken, sad-faced woman who had stolen into her bedroom earlier this morning and begged her—Aleda—to forgive and forget—and stay on a while.

"I was too soft!" Aleda told herself, yet, being what she was—extremely tender-hearted—knew that she could not have acted differently!

She stopped at the corner drug store for a cup of coffee. She saw herself reflected in the mirror back of the counter. She fluffed a curly lock of hair in front of each ear and set at a more chic angle her wide picture hat.

Like this—pale, wistful—Gary would see her! With a little throb of gladness that bore no vanity about it, Aleda realized that she was beautiful today!

This LOVE! Even in the prosaic corner drug store, didn't it beat about her like the wings of angels—like a heavenly vision—giving a translucent beauty to the pale, wistful face!

* * * * * *

The morning passed. Aleda took innumerable letters from William B. Lingard. Gary did not telephone.

But that meant nothing, she reassured herself. From something that her employer said, in one of the dictated missives, she understood that Gary would be dropping into the office on business later in the day.

She scarcely ate a thing for lunch, however. She was all keyed up and had no appetite.

Returning to her desk at half-past one, there was a small package lying on it. The sight of the firm, familiar

handwriting on the wrapper made her breath catch in her throat.

From Gary? Another present? He oughtn't . . . but it was so dear of him . . . her fingers shook as she undid the seal and paper . . . and then a sick feeling overcame her when she saw it was Smithson's vanity case from last night's party containing the hateful $50 note.

There was only a line from Gary—cool—and with no reference to a further meeting: "Herewith your property. Sorry I didn't give it back to you last night!" he wrote.

CHAPTER XLII

With a sulky expression on her usually impudent young face, Goldie de Renze sat on the edge of the kitchen table in the basement of the house on West Fortieth Street, nibbling at a cruller, sipping black coffee (she certainly required it on this "morning after"!) and trying not to listen to Marise!

"For once you'll hear the truth about yourself! I'm sick and tired and ashamed of your carryings on!"

"Oh, heck! Can that old stuff!"

"Don't talk to me like that! If you were only a year or two younger, I'd give you a good spanking, I declare!"

"You try it! Watch me step out forever from this old dump!"

" 'Step' is correct! A common little high-stepper who's already—at eighteen—gone too fast and far! If I weren't so—so darned mad at you—I could almost cry about you——!"

"Nix on the water works!"

"I'm in earnest, Goldie! A young girl coming into her home at four in the morning—drunk!"

The flapper tossed her red-gold head. "What if I'd had a glass or two? With all of you dead ones around, and I working like a dog to help things out for you, why grouse if once in a while I do try to put a little kick into my life?"

"You've got a home, haven't you? If you want to have a good time with your friends, why don't you ask them to come here?"

Miss Goldie sniffed, impertinently. "Huh? This old joint? Fine time they'd have here, it's like a morgue!"

"It's the best I can give you, Goldie!" Marise, in her heart deeply loving this wayward sister, felt almost at the breaking-point. "And I can't stand not knowing what you're doing—I fear for you so—I sit, and wonder, and think. . . ."

" 'What the eye doesn't see, the heart shouldn't grieve over!' " misquoted Goldie, pertly apt. Then, in a tone that was meant to be placating (it wouldn't suit her book to have a final quarrel with Marise just at this moment) she added: "Maybe I'll bring joy into the old maid's heart by suddenly marrying, and settling down?"

That brought a flood of recollection to Marise. She said, sharply: "If your mind's on that young fellow who came a couple of times to the club—the one you ogled so—you're on the wrong track! He's a gentleman—only real ladies could attract him—he's interested in Aleda——"

"Poof! A fig for Miss Prunes and Prisms! If I make up my mind I want a thing, I have my way!"

"Don't be too sure. You're—ordinary, Goldie! The way you are now, a man of that sort would only make a —a fool—out of your kind!"

"Hum! Haw!" Goldie's green eyes narrowed. There was a venomous look in them, just like an angry cat. She reached out now to scratch with a: "The same sort of a ninny—huh?—as you're made of, by your darling Clive?"

She saw her sister wince and redden, for those claws of hers had hurt Marise.

And she was glad of it. Goldie de Renze loved no female creature—not even the one nearest and kindest to her—in this wide, wide world!

Ensued a pause in the verbal battle. Goldie sipped her coffee. She wished she had an aspirin, for her head ached.

Aleda—and Gary Chester? She must further "sound" Marise.

"It was I who got Chester to bring Aleda home from the party," she began tentatively. "I couldn't break away myself—so soon——"

"He needed no pressing. He handed Aleda out of a handsome car, as though she were a little queen—and I heard him asking her to dine with him tonight!"

This was a snub for Goldie. Maybe it would make her more amenable to decent ways?

But Goldie merely cocked an eyebrow, murmured: "Huh? I s'pose he's calling for her at her office?" slid from the kitchen table, and with a casual: "By-by, ole wet-blanket!" she was off.

It was just on six o'clock, and Aleda preparing to depart from the office, when—to her surprise—Goldie marched in.

"I've a date this way. Just thought I'd drop in, and say 'hello.'" Her green eyes lighted on the vanity-case that had been presented to Aleda at the party last night. "Pretty little thing, what, ho!"

Aleda picked it up. She said, breathlessly:—"I want you to give it right back!"

"Hum! His highness didn't approve of it? The wind blows from that quarter, eh?"

She gave a quick glance round the office, expecting to see Gary Chester who—she had heard through her sister—had invited Aleda out tonight . . . at the same

time stretching forth a predatory paw (there was really something cat-like in the movements and the eyes of Goldie at this moment) towards the trinket.

Aleda hesitated, looked at Goldie . . . and distrusted. She opened the case and removed the $50 note. "I'll return this by registered mail to Mr. Smithson." She handed Goldie only the vanity-case.

Goldie was balked of the $50—greatly disappointed—though she hid her wrath. (She would get even with Aleda!)

Aloud she merely said, with nonchalance: "I'll give it to him at the Harvest Moon if he drops in this evening," and then went off.

She did not leave the building, however. In a telephone booth down by the front door on the main floor she peered through the glass panel toward the exit, waiting to see if Gary Chester should turn up.

She saw Aleda pass out among the crowds and cross the street. Should she follow her or not? Aleda had a sad, wilted sort of a look that somehow didn't betoken a rendezvous with a handsome young man.

And as Goldie hesitated a long red car slid up to the curb, and out of it stepped Gary Chester, who hurried into the building and toward the elevators.

Miss Goldie did not wait one moment longer. She rushed out of the booth and was just in time to get alongside Gary and step with him into the elevator.

CHAPTER XLIII

"WHAT a pleasant surprise!" Goldie, with a disarming frankness, held out her hand to Gary Chester in the rising elevator.

For a moment he was puzzled. Where on earth had he met the girl before?

Then he remembered the roof apartment party. Also —vaguely wasn't there some night club?

"It was awfully good of you to take Aleda home!" gushed Goldie. "I was so worried about her!"

He frowned. Presumptuous it was in this pert gamine to adopt—in connection with Aleda—such a patronizing air! The inference in her remark, too, was not pleasant.

He answered, stiffly: "I think Miss Ray was as glad to go home as I was to have her company."

"How very—gallant!" Annoyed as she was by this rejoinder, Goldie contrived a naive smile. When the elevator reached the floor on which William B. Lingard's office was located, she skipped out of the car by the side of the young man. "Looks as though I'm going your way?" This with an arch upward glance.

"Confound the girl!" thought Gary Chester as they walked down a passage. He wished she would be off. Fervently he hoped he had not missed Aleda? What a fool he'd been, not to have telephoned! What an ass to have returned her property with such a curt note!

He frowned again as he thought of the gift containing

the $50 bill. If she was the right sort of girl—and, of course, she was "true blue" despite the company in which he'd found her, and despite this red-haired "gamine's" innuendoes!—she would never accept money from a man—she'd send it back!

The young woman at the switchboard of William B. Lingard's office informed him that the chief already had a caller. Would he wait?

Oh, yes! Here was the chance he wanted for a word with Aleda. He had only made a pretext of coming here to speak to her employer, in order to get in touch with her!

He felt irritated when Goldie coolly accompanied him into the room in which Aleda worked.

With a sinking heart he saw her desk was closed, the typewriter put away—Aleda was gone!

The green eyes of Goldie caught that look of bitter disappointment. Aflame with jealousy (she must get even with Aleda!) her mind worked rapidly.

"Well, of all the nerve! She promised to wait for me! I was in here talking to her only ten minutes ago!"

At that she saw his face light up, and he turned quickly toward the door. "She can't have gone far! I'll try to catch up with her——"

That was contrary to what Goldie wanted. She said, in a quick, staccato tone: "Oh, it wouldn't be any use! Aleda has a date tonight!"

"With me? She told you that? What did she say?" He stopped in his tracks, wheeling about. His eyes were eager as a boy's when he first falls in love—shy, expectant.

Goldie contrived an arch, half deprecatory laugh. "Oh, no. She didn't say anything. It was just something I heard her say—to some man—over the telephone!" Then,

fibbing even more boldly, afraid that Gary might call Aleda at home if she were not more specific in her news, she added, as though it were torn from her reluctantly: "It's none of my business whom Aleda dines with and goes with to the theatre, but from the sound of the voice on the line—and I couldn't help overhearing—it was one of the men from the party last night."

Twice Gary cleared his throat before he asked, abruptly: "Did she accept—this invitation?"

Goldie's green eyes widened. "Why, of course! It was one of those awfully wealthy fellows—he was very attentive to her at the party—I can't think why, when she encouraged him so last night, she now has to go and give this back?" From her handbag Goldie produced the little vanity case.

Gary stared at the trinket. "That the same one I took from you when Miss Ray and I left the roof apartment?" The query was sharp.

"Yep. It was a present for Aleda." Then, as though a light dawned suddenly, she gave a gurgling exclamation: "Huh! I've got it! This was a gift from Mr. Smithson. Aleda knows he's married, so he isn't any catch! The other boy friend's sore about her taking things, in any case, from another man—she's playing the one off against the other—her 'butter-and-egg' admirer 'ull no doubt give her something a whole heap handsomer tonight!"

Gary regarded Goldie frigidly. "You have a very poor opinion of your friend."

Her gaze—extraordinarily naive it seemed—met his. "I have a great opinion of Aleda! For all she looks so simple, she 'knows her onions,' alrighty! She's awake to her own interest! She's up to the mark!" Goldie opened

the lid of the vanity case, holding the trinket so that Gary could see inside.

"There was a $50 bill——" escaped him before he could bite it back.

Goldie laughed meaningly. "Doesn't that prove Aleda's clever? She removed the money from the case before the grand gesture of returning the case to the giver! She took out the $50 in my presence half an hour ago! You ask her! And it's my belief—and I'm not blaming her, because money IS a temptation—she's left the office in a hurry to get to the shops before closing time, and buy herself some glad rags for tonight! The only thing is ——" here Goldie achieved a plaintive touch—"she's put me in an awkward position with Smithson! I've got to do the dirty deed on her behalf—I've got to hand him back his case minus his cash!"

CHAPTER XLIV

ALEDA walked up Wall Street with misted eyes. Intolerable disappointment nagged at her.

Up to the last minute, till the arrival of Goldie—an unwelcome visitor—she had hoped, even against her better judgment, that Gary Chester would telephone to her.

That curtly worded note, with the return of the case!

Even though it had wounded her, she thought: "He didn't mean it! He was indignant—shocked—perhaps even jealous"—(and wasn't jealousy a sign of love?—she tried to buoy herself with that). "He'll come out of his mood—his feeling for me is too strong to let a little thing come between us—before the day's over he'll telephone!"

He had not done so. He had apparently wished to call off their evening together. Unconscious that she had missed Gary by only a matter of minutes, and that Goldie was, at this very instant, trying to poison the young man's mind against her, Aleda—with blurred eyes and a real heartache—walked up Wall Street.

The soft air of June caressed her pretty features. There would be a moon again tonight—a wisp of a moon—the same slim crescent that had smiled so sympathetically on the pair of them only last evening!

Was it so short a while ago? It seemed like centuries!

This love! She knew (no use denying it!) how much, how achingly, he "counted" in her life——

"To love is to suffer," says the old French proverb. And now, for the first time in her brief span of years, Aleda was learning the meaning of this pain.

But she held her chin up. In the straight little linen frock that showed the sweet curves of her slim body, she looked like a young Diana, gallantly facing life.

She climbed into a street car at the top of Wall Street. It had no doors or windows, and was open to the evening air. Perched on its hard bench she rode up Broadway, seeking diversion from her disappointment in watching the crowds, the myriad happenings of the town.

Like a grain of sand in the desert, wasn't she? she asked of herself. One of a myriad Cinderellas? And each one waiting in her heart for her rightful mate?

And she had thought that she—Aleda Ray—new to this surging life, had found him?

Well . . . even if she had been mistaken . . . hide the heartache . . . face the world gallant and gay!

The Greek philosophers—(up in the Adirondacks, Aleda had read considerably, probing thirstily into the long ago) had that same idea. Don't permit anything to hurt you! Get the laugh on life, with the chin held up!

"I had a sort of a date myself, tonight," said Goldie de Renze coyly, her green eyes fixed on Gary Chester, with a deliberate invitation, "but I have a hunch that my date isn't going to materialize!"

Which was correct—in that Goldie's engagement was purely of her own imagining!

They were in William B. Lingard's outer office, and Gary had missed Aleda by only a few minutes.

The young man favored Goldie with a disapproving—not to say, distasteful—glance.

It was not what she had hoped for, with her coquettish manner, and her "come hither-ish" advance.

She'd missed her cues, apparently. She would try another tack.

"You remember our chats at the Harvest Moon? That's the little night club where I dance. Your friend the Countess said something—it was ever so sweet of her!—about getting me a chance on the stage."

"Did she, indeed? She says many things, and then forgets about them——" The young man was annoyingly distrait.

Goldie kept back her temper. One had to control oneself, in dealing with a certain type of male.

"I hate to repeat compliments, but she told me I had real talent—she called it 'dramatic art'."

"She was quite right. Both in the adjective and the noun—and taken separately." There was a flicker in his eyes, as though the young man were faintly, sarcastically, amused at her.

She did not relish that. She slid down from her perch on Aleda's desk, and with an edge to her voice, said:

"Since you're not appreciating my company, why don't you go in the other room?" She cocked her head towards Lingard's private sanctum.

"I think his visitor's still there. I shan't stay." Gary coolly took his hat, gave a quick nod to her, and with a: "If he comes out, please tell him I couldn't wait"—was gone!

Goldie was wrathful. But it was a consoling thought to know that she had at least thrown a monkey-wrench into Aleda's chances with this "high-hat" youth!

She sat ruminating for a few moments. Then, as she was about to depart, the glass door marked "Private"

opened, and a thick-set, strongly featured man of middle-age, appeared in the aperture.

This must be the rich William B. Lingard, Aleda's boss——

She was about to deliver Gary's message—her lips opened—then fell into a gape——

For the man, after his first glance at her, was standing there rigid and transfixed, his eyes fastened on her in a prolonged and almost mesmerized stare!

"Ye—es? Wha—what's the matter?" stammered Goldie, put about.

He came toward her, then, "Just as though I were a python, he a rabbit, and I'd hypnotized him!" she afterward exclaimed.

He said—his eyes still fastened on her—in a queer, excited mumble:

"You? After all this time? Marise? It IS Marise!"

CHAPTER XLV

"MARISE? It IS Marise?" William B. Lingard, in his outer office, was staring at Goldie as though hypnotized.

At first, before he voiced Marise's name in this tense manner, she had thought he was insane.

She gave a shaky laugh now, half relieved, yet extraordinarily curious. He had mistaken her for her elder sister, oddly enough.

But that was all.

"I'm NOT Marise—not by twenty years! She's my old-maid sister!" Goldie got herself together, and smiled impishly into his face. She was still sore from Gary Chester's cavalier departure and lack of interest in herself. Here was a fresh field for an adventure.

This man was rich. At some time or another—evidently years ago, since he had mistaken her own youthful prettiness for one whose charms (according to Goldie's idea) had long since vanished—he had had some romantic association with Marise?

She, then, the younger sister—who now had the advantage of all the freshness—would profit by it. She said, coquettishly: "Won't I do instead?" With a provocative upward glance from her green eyes.

He still looked as though he were in a daze. "A little sister? I never knew she had a—a sister? Would you mind telling me—your name—your full name?"

"Goldie de Renze," rapped out the flapper. What mystery was here?

"De Renze?" he repeated. His brows knitted. There was a puzzled, searching look on his face. Goldie decided it was a good-looking manly sort of countenance, albeit rugged. Not that she cared one way or the other about his appearance, since he had cash—oodles of cash!

"Yes. That's our name. And as Marise is an old maid, she's never had another name—nor likely to have!" Goldie's laugh grated.

"Why are you here?"

"Your secretary, Miss Ray—I know her." Then, with a quick stroke of imagination:—"I was expecting her to come out with me to dinner tonight. But she had gone from the office." Goldie regarded Mr. Lingard plaintively, provocatively. "So I'm left in the lurch——"

He fell into the trap—but not because of her charm, as she imagined.

He said, slowly, hesitatingly: "I'd like to have—a little talk with you? You say your dinner engagement has fallen through? Would you—I wonder"—he seemed diffident about it, but her expectant and encouraging manner helped him—"would you care to take a bit of food with me tonight?"

She leaped at the opportunity. Her green eyes gleamed. She'd show them . . . Aleda . . . Marise . . . and Gary Chester, who had snubbed her, what a big killing she could make, what big game she could bring down!

"I'd love it. Let's go somewhere where it's cool. Say, the Ritz roof?"

He was a little startled. She thought: "He's married, and he doesn't want to be seen with me in such a public place?"

But she persisted. She'd never been inside the Ritz, and now was her chance to flaunt herself.

How she would boast about it to Aleda! (who would doubtless pass the news on to that stuck-up Gary Chester!) How she would crow over Marise!

As they bowled uptown in his beautifully appointed limousine, Goldie snuggled back in the interior beside Mr. Lingard, thoroughly enjoying herself.

It was annoying that, throughout dinner (she ordered the most expensive dishes on the menu) he persistently questioned her about Marise.

At last she said, to put a quietus on this subject:—"Marise is head over heals in love with a young and good-looking Englishman!"

William B. Lingard was silent for a while, staring across the palm-decked roof of the Ritz into space. Was it possible, the flapper wondered, that he really had been sweet upon her elder sister? She took the bull by the horns, asked: "Are you married?" and when he answered: "No," she began to plot and plan . . .

Suppose that she—Goldie de Renze—could contrive to catch him, she needn't stay married to him long—she'd make it too uncomfortable for him, and have a divorce and thereby gain enormous alimony! A wise girl (Goldie had an inflated idea of her own abilities) could play her cards cleverly!

At the end of the meal, he said, abruptly: "I'll take you home."

And when they reached the house on West Fortieth, and the chauffeur helped her and his master from the car, and rang the bell, Marise opened the front door.

She turned very white when she saw who was with Goldie. She held on to the door-knob, as though for support.

Lingard walked into the house.

From then, on, it seemed that Goldie was forgotten. Those two sat on the sofa in the living room, talking in low tones.

He wanted to hear so much of Marise's life . . .

The phone rang. Marise said: "Goldie, you go dear, and answer it." The girl rose reluctantly and went out into the hall.

It was only a wrong number, and as she was hurrying back, for fear she should miss anything, she heard Lingard say, tensely:—

"If I'd only known your whereabouts! Why did you hide away? And why did you change your name, Marise? What's this de Renze business? Why did you assume you had a different name! When I knew you——"

Breath catching in amazement, Goldie halted. Marise —not a de Renze? Good heavens! It was impossible . . . incredible?

She stole behind the heavy curtains that were near the sofa, and that divided the lobby from the living room. Marise murmured:—"Sh—sh! She mustn't hear . . ."

Then Goldie had to strain her ears to catch it—again came Lingard's voice.

"She doesn't know who she is, Marise? Is that quite fair to her? Some day you'll have to tell little Goldie that she isn't your sister, but—your daughter! To keep her in the dark so long isn't quite—fair—to the child!"

CHAPTER XLVI

Goldie de Renze listened behind the curtains that divided the lobby from the living room—an insane fury mingling with a burning curiosity.

Lingard and Marise—sitting there together so chummily on the sofa—speaking about her—Goldie.

"Some day you'll have to tell her that she isn't your sister, but your daughter!" Lingard in tense tones had just voiced those words, pregnant with fate, to Marise!

Goldie was staggered—for the first time in her life really appalled by what she'd heard!

Marise's daughter? Not a young sister, but—her child?

Incredible!

With thudding heart she pressed closer to the curtains, listening intently.

The rich man was speaking, in a low, strained voice.

"Why did you adopt the name 'de Renze'?"

Marise put both hands to her face. It was as though she wished, most urgently, to blot out the past and its mishaps . . .

"I wanted . . . to forget . . .!" The phrase was melodramatic. It reminded Goldie of a period in her life when, as a tiny child—the little orphaned sister, as she'd understood!—she accompanied Marise on tour with a stock company.

She ground her small white teeth with anger when

she heard what she termed that "stage tremulo" in Marise's voice . . .

Liar! And hypocrite!

Marise—she had just admitted it—was HER MOTHER—not her sister! She Goldie de Renze (so-called . . . even the name was a fake!)—was Marise's child.

Good God! It was vile of Marise to have so deceived her!

But there was a law of compensation! Marise would PAY dearly!

The wealthy Lingard . . . sitting so close to Marise on the sofa! Marise was "passe" . . . old . . . but he was gazing into Marise's face!

They had entirely forgotten her—Goldie—the unlucky issue of this long-ago love affair!

For in Goldie's mind—over-sharpened by the devious ways and mental processes of Broadway!—stood out one fact. It had been gleaned from Lingard's shocked excitement at the sight of her . . . hadn't he—struck by the resemblance to the alleged "sister," hailed her as: "Marise! Marise!"

And hadn't Marise turned white with emotion at the mere sight of Lingard on her own front steps?

She—Goldie—(with the cognomen of "de Renze")—was really Goldie Lingard!

It was a staggering thought.

But she believed it!

And she would make them pay, this pair!

He'd said he wasn't married! Marise was an old maid!

How dare they bring her into the world and trick her? Without a father—background—the prestige of Lingard's money—what a cruel handicap in life!

She couldn't hear their voices now—so faint they were . . .! Her anger and her venom were so great that she felt weak and giddy, as though the world were slipping away from her!

After what seemed a long, long time, she pulled herself together, and that scheming brain of hers set to work again. Hadn't Clive Mortimer a plan on hand—he'd outlined it quite sketchily to Goldie, but she got the drift of it—to wring money out of silly little Smithson, because the latter had rented a roof apartment in a fake name—where he could give cheery parties once in a while, without the knowledge of his wife?

Well, she—Goldie (of the assumed name "de Renze"!) had a much bigger trump-card in her hand!

Marise was a weak fool—more "sinned against than sinning"—for a long time this pert "gamine" of a girl had mentally catalogued Marise!

But Lingard was prominent in the financial world—extremely rich—with prestige—for him there would be much at stake! Clive would advise her as to "compensation money" . . . the price of her silence . . . it was all quite proper and in order, if she were really this man's child!

* * * * * *

"So he's gone? I heard everything you and he said to each other!" In the shabby living room of the house on West Fortieth Street, Goldie—who now beileved that highly important blood ran in her veins—faced Marise.

Marise was shaking. To a gentler, more compassionate heart there was a pitiful appeal in that white face.

But not to Goldie. Goldie was furious . . . beside herself with rage.

"You heard . . .?" The words were dragged reluctantly from her "sister's" pale lips:

"That you are my mother?" In the green eyes were a tigerish luminosity, ready for attack.

Marise choked, swallowed, gave a helpless little gesture with her hands.

"I love you, Goldie! Can't you understand—always—ever since you were born—you've been my whole life!"

From her even teeth, and displaying every cruel one of them, Goldie's lips curled back just like a wild cat.

"Cut out the melodrama! Despite the sob stuff, I always had the feeling I was on your conscience—that you were double-crossing me! But before you leave this room——" —Goldie stood truculently in front of the older woman, barring the exit—"you're going to tell me the whole truth about my parentage!"

CHAPTER XLVII

"I MARRIED—when I was seventeen," dully announced Marise.

She had sunk back in the rocker in the living room, her limbs too shaky to support her. Her hands—pathetically idle for once in her hard-working life—were folded in her lap.

Her eyes had the dumb, pleading pathos of some animal in pain—like a sorely beaten dog.

With the air of a young Daniel come to judgment, Goldie towered over her quondam "sister," Marise.

"I want the truth." The words were snapped out, brutally. "You say you are my mother? Then, where's my father? Who is he? Where's my birth-certificate?"

"I've got it." The answer choked on a sob.

Goldie's eyes narrowed in swift, incredulous surprise and calculation. "You mean you were really married—legally—to this Lingard man?"

"To—Lingard?" Marise raised a wet, startled gaze to her young daughter's face. "How ever did you come to imagine such a thing? Mr. Lingard—wasn't my husband——"

This was a shock for Goldie. This knowledge flung her new plans out of gear.

"Then who was he? Haven't I the right to get some information? Doesn't it rather tremendously concern—myself?"

"You're right," rejoined Marise, tonelessly. "I only kept the truth from you because I loved you so—because I wanted to save you unnecessary pain."

Goldie looked squarely, truculently at the woman whom she had always regarded as an elder sister. The years of Marise's many sacrifices counted little—at this moment —to her . . .

"The truth? I ask for it! Who was my father?"

Marise answered, mechanically: "A criminal!"

"A—what?" For a second it looked as though Goldie, in her fury, might even strike Marise. Her head was reared up like that of an angry corba. "How dare you? What do you mean? Tell me . . . quick!"

"I met him and married him at seventeen," said Marise dully. Tonight's incidents—the thrill and pain of seeing Lingard, her old sweetheart, had completely shattered her poise. It was so hard to control her trembling. "My people were fearfully against the marriage. I was—a country girl—from Oklahoma. He was what they would called a 'rounder.' Made a precarious living—from different sources—especially from the race track."

"You knew that?" The words were like a pistol shot.

"No. I was a child—infatuated—ignorant. What did I know of life? I lived with my grandmother and two middle-aged aunts. They'd kept me shielded—almost cloistered. And when my chance came along, I listened to the first smooth tongue . . . was fascinated by the first handsome face!

"They tried to stop things—but I ran away with him, and we were married. He took me to Chicago. You were born there, Goldie, just at a time when I was waking up to the appalling knowledge of the sort of a husband I had got . . .!"

The girl mumbled: "It was hateful of you, all these years to deceive me so—to keep this back!"

As though she had not heard her, Marise continued, still in that flat, toneless voice:

"I was frightfully unhappy, and when you were two years old I left him and hid away in another town. I worked as waitress in a cafe—took in washing—finally I went on the stage.

"We toured. It was a desperately hard life—but I had you, Goldie—no sacrifice seemed hard, because I had—my child.

"It was then that I met William B. Lingard. We were playing in Chicago. He was—a clerk in a small bank.

"He fell in love with me immediately. And I was crazy about him. So crazy that I made the big mistake of not telling him, right from the start, that I was married. I wanted to wait, you see, until he should ask me to become his wife—and then I would tell him.

"It was a fatal error." Marise's voice shook. "For he called at our lodgings one day, when I was out, and you—a little thing of four, and the very image of me—danced into the room. He asked you who you were—you told him I was your mother—and he walked out.

"We had a scene afterwards, he and I. He was hot-tempered, and he said cruel things about my—my duplicity! I told him your father was a crook—a gangster—but by this time Lingard was so angry and so doubtful that he didn't seem to believe me.

"And I got mad, myself. It hurt so. Because I loved this man. And the sad part was that you and I were leaving Chicago next day, with the company, and—in the height of this misunderstanding and quarrel—Lingard and I parted.

"Right on top of that, your father's name was blazoned

in the papers. He'd been caught in a hold-up, was arrested, and got ten years in jail.

"I changed our name immediately, and left the company for another, because of the shame and the scandal connected with our real name.

"Tonight——" —Marise's voice shook again—"my old sweetheart tells me how he regretted our quarrel, and how he tried to find me; but I was no longer Marise Miller, but de Renze, and as we never again went near Chicago his hopes of finding me dwindled away. And yet——" —there was a sad triumph suddenly upon her face—"he never married—and never forgot his early sweetheart."

Goldie said, sharply: "My father? Haven't I the right, in the middle of all this sob stuff about Lingard, to hear where he is, and what happened to him? He must be—out of jail?" Her nostrils quivered on the hateful word.

"He died in the third year of his imprisonment," said Marise quietly.

Without another query or glance toward the woman whom she now knew was her mother, Goldie walked out of the room. The world was hateful. She had just learnt she was the daughter of a criminal!

* * * * * *

Late that night, on her return from the Harvest Moon Club, and worried that Goldie had not put in an appearance there, Marise went to her daughter's bedroom.

On the dressing-table was a scribbled bit of paper. Even before she read it, Marise with a sick pain guessed what had occurred . . . Her fingers shook uncontrollably, her eyes were a blur.

Goldie had gone! Gone—leaving behind her a cruel message—gone "forever," she wrote, in her anger and resentment, from her mother's house!

CHAPTER XLVIII

ALEDA—who had missed meeting Gary Chester by a mere matter of minutes—rode up Broadway from her office in an open street car. She was unaware of the fact that, at this moment, Goldie—who had vainly tried to fascinate Gary, and, failing in that, had contrived to plant suspicion in his mind against Aleda concerning the return of the $50—had extracted an invitation from William B. Lingard to dine with him on the Ritz roof that night!

The sequel to this tete-a-tete with Goldie was that Lingard—eager for a meeting with his old sweetheart—had accompanied the girl to Marise's house.

The bomb had burst, then, shatteringly, for Goldie! Stealthily listening behind the living room curtains, she had learned, from Lingard's conversation, that—instead of being Marise's little sister, as she had been brought up to believe—she, Goldie de Renze (in actuality, Goldie Miller!) was Marise's daughter, through a youthful, hidden marriage with—a criminal!

Goldie's rage knew no limits. She would leave immediately. She would shake from her feet forever the dust of this house!

* * * * * *

Unconscious of the drama—even tragedy!—that was occurring, Aleda spent the evening by herself.

At 42nd and Broadway she left the street car, walked

to the postoffice, and in a registered envelope returned the $50 to Mr. Smithson with a curt scribbled note.

She felt a little better after that, but still too restless and worried to go home.

A sandwich and a cup of coffee at a drug store counter was her supper. Thereafter she went alone to a picture house.

Her mind full of Gary Chester, the love-story on the screen but served to make her loneliness the worse.

She stayed through the performance, however. And when she got back to the house on West Fortieth Street, it was after 11 P.M. Aleda went straight to her room.

She was awakened a couple of hours later by a flare of light in her eyes. Someone was leaning over her, giving her a little shake.

"Aleda! Wake up! I've just *got* to talk to someone!"

It was Marise!

Then came the strange tale!

"Goldie? Your—*daughter?* Not—a sister?" Sleep forgotten, Aleda stared at Marise.

"Yes. Yes." Marise was sitting on the side of Aleda's bed. Her eyes were blazing with a variety of emotions. She had gripped Aleda's hand, and was clinging to it, as though in desperate need of some support and reassurance. "And when Goldie got the news, she—she took it mighty badly! Went on like a fury, and accused me of ruining her life! And look at this note, Aleda!" —Marise held out a scrap of paper—"when I got back from the Harvest Moon, it was in her bedroom, on the bureau. She—oh! the poor child!—the shock's unhinged her! She's *run* away!" choked Marise.

"Nonsense!" Aleda pulled herself together. Astounding as no doubt the news had been to Goldie, there was nothing insane about the cruel missive! "She's only gone off

in a huff to one of her girl friends, and she'll be back tomorrow or the next day! You just wait! And you've nothing in the world to reproach yourself with! You've been a wonderful mother to your sister—I mean, your *daughter*——" —Aleda patted Marise's hand sympathetically.

"You think so? From the day she was born, I've worked like a slave."

"I'm sure of it. Don't fret over Goldie. She'll be right back." Because she was fond of Marise, and William B. Lingard was her employer, and because her own sore heart was full of Gary Chester—and romance—she said, breathlessly: "Do tell me if Mr. Lingard still cares for you, Marise? You know he's never married? It must have been for your sake he remained a bachelor!"

* * * * * *

A week elapsed, then two. No word from Gary. He came neither to the office, nor did he telephone.

As the days went by, Aleda's hopes sank lower . . .

She heard he was going to Italy. Was to make a report on some Italian water power.

She wanted to call him at the Yale Club. Yet she was shy . . . at the same time proud . . . and afraid!

Of his own accord he must get in touch with her. She couldn't take the initiative!

Marise's anxiety anent Goldie had been, in a measure, lessened by the news that her young daughter had obtained a dance-engagement in a fashionable hotel in Saratoga. Clive Mortimer, who gone up to Canada on a rum-running mission, had got wind of the truant's whereabouts and reported to Marise.

"Not a drop of liquor will come into the Harvest Moon

as long as I'm hostess and entertainer!" grimly announced Marise. "So if Clive makes a big haul of bootleg, he won't get one cent from my little club!"

The meeting with her long-ago sweetheart, Lingard, had put new courage into Marise. There had been further meetings since the memorable evening when Goldie had made her exit! Despite her worries over her truant daughter, there seemed to be a second blooming and a radiance about Marise.

William B. Lingard, too, looked younger. Much of his gruffness was gone. One day—at four o'clock on a Friday—he said to Aleda: "Tonight I go to Chicago on business, and won't be back before the middle of next week. You look pale and tired. Why don't you take a few days up in your country home and see your people? It will be all right with me if you're back in the office on Thursday."

She flushed at his kind tone, his thoughtfulness. And yet she hesitated, thinking of the expenses . . .

He said: "You've worked well. I want to keep you fit. I'll get your transportation——"

That evening, she was packing—assisted by Marise—when a ring came at the door-bell of the house on West Fortieth Street. Aleda went down into the lobby and opened the front-door.

A policeman stood on the steps. He came forward and said, gruffly:

"I'm here to take Miss de Renze to the district attorney. Are you the woman I want?"

CHAPTER XLIX

A POLICEMAN had come to the house on West Fortieth Street for Goldie!

And the whole trouble had occurred through Clive!

"It was that horrible little flower shop he induced Goldie to work in, without my consent or knowledge!" wept Marise on her return from the district attorney's office. "Oh! lately I had my suspicions, when I heard rumors of people going there for their mail, and introductions being made through Goldie, and so many wild parties, and Goldie with her bag stuffed full of money! And then her disappearing that night so suddenly! It wasn't just because she was mad at me over her—her parentage! She'd got wind of this trouble with the police! She was afraid!"

Aleda was startled—shocked—albeit sympathetic.

She pitied Marise, who had had such hard luck and so many troubles. But now she felt she would be glad to get away from this house.

Was history repeating itself? Goldie's father had died in prison. And now the district attorney was on the track of his child!

"It seems that Goldie and that wretch Clive had done things against the law, through the medium of their shady little flower shop!" Marise dried her eyes and helped Aleda lock her suitcase. "Oh! Goldie wouldn't know what she was doing! But if she sets foot in New York,

I'm convinced—from what was told me in the district attorney's office—they'll arrest her! I'll write her at once to Saratoga and warn her. Whatever happens, they mustn't get hold of the poor child!"

"If you wire the Twentieth Century on its way to Chicago, maybe you could get in touch with Mr. Lingard?" suggested Aleda, tentatively. "He's so clever—he'd advise you——"

But Marise stiffened. "I don't want him to know about this!" She was on the defensive. "There was scandal enough about my husband! Now—it would be too much—about—my child . . .!"

* * * * * *

Soft airs blew over Indian Lake. In the lush grass were paint-brush buttercups and daisies. Among the trees—beech, maple, poplar, spruce—birds sang.

There was a lovely scent of pine, too. And balsam.

In the old family car, Aleda drove to the scene of her first meeting with Gary Chester!

Ah! beautiful the meadows here, stretching down to the blue jewel of a lake!

"'Spring in the Austrian Tyrol!'" he'd call it. There was a famous picture of that name . . .

But it was Summer now.

And Gary—without a parting word to her—had sailed for Europe! Perhaps—figuratively speaking—he would be again courting his "Austrian milkmaid!"

She didn't care. She wouldn't be so foolish. It was only the beguiling beauty of this scene—and not its memories—that made her heart ache . . .

She must be getting home for supper. They had their evening meal early, here in the Adirondacks.

The knowledge that she had helped her parents was a

comfort. And it was pathetic to see their joy in having her—even for a short time—with them again!

Dear mother and dad! The gray hairs—the furrowed, brave old faces! Surely her love for them would be sufficient to fill her heart!

And yet it ached, foolishly, so that with blurred eyes she saw this exquisite panorama. The green, flower-spangled meadows that had formed the background of their first meeting—she and Gary—how it all came back to her, here by Indian Lake!

And wasn't there the same bluejay—oh! drat the little fellow!—perching arrogantly on a hemlock bough? He shook his wings at her before he tucked his head down for his evening slumber—impertinently, and with a challenge—as though saying:

"You silly little human, why worry so?"

Aleda was imaginative. She flushed—just as though he'd read her innermost thoughts—as, coming back to earth, she "trod on the gas."

The ancient car groaned and wheezed, but finally shot forward. It traversed the fern-fringed, sunshine-filigreed ribbon of road.

She was near her home when, at a bend of the highway, she saw a blue denimed figure walking on the grass. There was something familiar in that lithe, well-knit figure, in the jaunty swing of his stride.

He turned to look behind him at the sound of the engine. Before he recognized the pretty, flushed young driver he had half halted in his tracks. He was four miles from the inn where he was staying . . . a lift would be acceptable . . .

Aleda's heart thudded. *Gary?* . . . back in this very district? . . . it was a mirage? . . . it was impossible?

She pressed her foot upon the brake, however. And the car came to a halt within a few yards of the young man.

She was quite speechless. Things went too deep with Aleda. At a crucial moment such as this words could not come quick . . .

But Gary—his gray eyes lighted with an incredulous astonishment—and pleasure—came forward towards her, hat in his hand.

"Miss Ray! Aleda! Of all the coincidences! Have you given up your job with Lingard? Why! I—I'm lucky!" At sight of her, his doubts and suspicions had melted away like snow in the Sahara. "I'm up here, making a second report for the Hudson water power!" He opened the dilapidated door and climbed into the car.

CHAPTER L

"I SAIL for Europe next week," said Gary Chester, his gray eyes full of a shiny warmth as they rested on Aleda at the wheel of her old car.

It was a lovely Summer evening in the Adirondacks. They were skimming along the fern-fringed, tree-lined roads as though New York, with all its bustle and its business, never had existed for this pair.

Aleda was on a brief holiday, back with the old folks.

Gary was making a further investigation for the Hudson water power.

And they had met—quite accidentally—close to the scene of their first encounter. Neither had been aware that the other was in the vicinity.

Gary said now: "I was awfully disappointed that you didn't wait for me that evening. We—we had a sort of an—engagement—if I remember aright?"

Apology—a wish to set relations straight between them—was in his hesitant tones.

Aleda flushed, staring straight ahead at the fern-fringed ribbon of road that led toward her parents' house. She told herself, with a violent quiet: "He thinks he can throw me down, and then—when he feels like it, and there isn't anyone else in this neighborhood for company! —take me up again! But I shan't be 'easy'—not a second time!"

Aloud she said, with an assumed nonchalance, for her

heart was thudding painfully at the thrilling nearness of this young man:

"I was afraid——! You know I wanted——!"

Deliberately she slowed down the pace of the old car. There was no subterfuge about Aleda. Better to have things out right here!

"You were afraid I wasn't the right kind of a girl to know, when you found me at the roof apartment party? And still less so, when you returned that vanity case to me, containing the $50 note."

It was his turn to redden. Before he could protest, however, she proceeded vehemently:

"If I'd known how you felt, I'd have choked Goldie sooner than let her phone you to come for me! It was only—only——" —her voice shook—"after our wonderful ride out to Long Island, and our beautiful talk together, I did count you as a friend—a real friend!"

Gary put a hand on her shoulder, as they sat in the slowly-moving car.

"Who's Goldie? I had no phone call. I assure you, on my word of honor, that I don't know what you mean!"

Aleda said, breathlessly: "Goldie called you at the Yale Club on the night of our—our outing—to come to the roof apartment—(I hated the whole party)—and fetch me home!"

Said Gary, mystified: "I received no such message. I came to the roof apartment entirely on your note!"

"My note? What note?"

Without further parley, Gary pulled from his pocketbook the typewritten missive Goldie had sent. "'Gary, ole dear,'" Aleda read, astounded, "'come on and join us on the roof at 0072 Madison Avenue . . . love from Aleda.'"

She brought the car to a halt. She read the note again,

said, blankly: "I never sent this! I've never even seen this! And to use my name in connection with it is—a forgery!"

* * * * * *

To Aleda, that evening . . . with the ensuing days up in the Adirondacks . . . were one enchanted dream of happiness!

Gary and she! This magic countryside . . . their reconciliation!

His meeting with her parents! The old folks' genuine appreciation of the young man!

Misunderstandings were removed. Despite hurt pride over his previous disbelief in her, she let him know about the return of the $50 note.

Oh, she was proud, this beautiful Aleda! Gary told himself that he had found the real girl of his heart!

They traveled back to New York together on Wednesday morning. Gary had to catch an Italian liner for Genoa that night.

Aleda saw him off on the luxurious vessel. When the bugle blew its "Visitors Ashore!" slogan, and before the gangplank was withdrawn, he whispered in her ear:

"Next time, Aleda, I won't go alone! You'll come with me? A promise?"

Her heart rose in a thrill of rapture. Tears ached at her throat.

* * * * * *

Back in the house on West Fortieth Street, Aleda—happy in the smooth progress of her love affair with Gary Chester—sought to cheer up Marise.

"Not a line from Goldie in two weeks! I've written her three times? She doesn't reply!" Goldie's mother—

hitherto known as Goldie's elder sister—turned to Aleda for sympathy.

Aleda overflowed with it. Happy herself, she wanted everybody else to be the same!

"Goldie will come around all right! You give her time! And"—Aleda shook an arch finger at her friend —"in worrying about Goldie, who's quite fit to take care of herself, don't forget your old flame and my boss, William B. Lingard, who looks years and years younger since he's met his old sweetheart again!"

Marise was all a-flutter. Deep in her heart she had always cared for Lingard. And the words he had spoken to her that night rang in her ears like the echo of an old love refrain!

* * * * * *

"Miss Ray, take this cable." William B. Lingard was at his desk. "Please accept Bianchi Power Company's conditions. Wire further details on Leviathan. Am leaving tomorrow. Send final particulars or try meet me Ritz Paris."

Aleda paused, pencil in hand. "To whom shall I send this cable, Mr. Lingard?"

"To Gary Chester, Hotel Excelsior, Milan," he answered.

Her Gary!

"Anything else?"

William B. Lingard leaned forward. He said, briefly: "I sail for Paris tomorrow night on the Gigantic. I require a secretary. The trip will be brief. My niece, the Countess Dellamanca, will chaperone you. Can I count on you to sail with me tomorrow, Miss Ray?"

CHAPTER LI

At half past six each evening, before she dressed for dinner on the big Atlantic liner that—in her capacity of private secretary to William B. Lingard—was carrying her on a quick business trip to France (where perhaps she might see Gary Chester!) Aleda wrote her diary.

SATURDAY

"I can't believe it's really happened! It's too wonderful! Yet when the stewardess (such a smile-y, fat, cheery, white-uniformed person!) woke me this morning with a cup of tea and a big bunch of black grapes, and I sat up in my little nickel-plated bed and felt the cabin gently creaking and rocking, and a lovely breeze blowing through that sunlit porthole, I knew it wasn't just a dream, but that I was really and truly on the Atlantic Ocean!

"It's magnificent, this boat! A floating palace. When we came aboard just before midnight last night—Mr. Lingard, his niece (the Countess Dellamanca) and humble little me—it was like walking into the foyer of the Plaza! Almost incredible to think it was a ship!

"I'm on C deck, and it's miles getting to the dining room! I take one of the elevators—there are several of 'em dotted around. And half a dozen shops.

"That reminds me of the frantic shopping I got through before I left New York, helped by Marise. She's a gem!

She knew the most wonderful wholesale places where I could get sports clothes—simple little affairs—at half the price they're marked in the stores. I got a pink ensemble in milanese. Also a white knitted sweater edged in scarlet, with a scarlet skirt and a little sports coat.

"And Marise insisted on a taffeta evening frock in rose, the skirt cut in frilly petals. A 'robe de style,' she called it. It was awfully extravagant—$30 wholesale—it retails for $55, Marise's friend assured us—and it's the prettiest and most becoming dress I've ever had in all my life.

"I wonder will 'he' see me in it, in Paris? And if he does, will he think I look as Marise told me I did—'as lovely as a rose.'"

SUNDAY

"Wore the rose frock last evening at the dance, and had so many partners that the doctor (who's in charge of entertainments, and is fearfully kind and humorous) carried me off to the deck for a breath of air!

"This ship's so huge and heavy that the dance floor in the saloon seems to remain quite level even when the sea is choppy! With all the little tables dotted around, and people laughing and sipping and enjoying themselves and the soft golden lights, and the orchestra playing the newest fox trot, you'd never—except for now and again the faintest throb of the engines, like a dull hum coming through the floor—imagine you were on a ship!

"The Countess Dellamanca looked magnificent in white satin and pearls, like a bride! But that woman's sad at heart. She spent most of the evening in the card room, a jade cigarette holder between her lips, smoking continuously, and playing for high stakes at bridge.

"She snubs me—or rather, ignores me! A couple of

gentlemen asked her who I was, and I heard her answer, with a disparaging shrug: 'Oh, only my uncle's little stenographer!'

"But what do I care? I'm proud of my work—it's brought so much into my life! If I hadn't taken this job, I'd never have met the most charming, lovable, wonderful man in the world. And didn't he tell me that the only women he has any admiration for are the working women? Isn't that enough?

"At morning service, which was held in the dining saloon today, with the captain reading the service, I noticed that the Countess Dellamanca had two tears slipping down her cheeks during one of the hymns. It was at the line, 'Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away!'

"Was she thinking of Gary Chester? I hope she was thinking of her husband!"

MONDAY

"A dreadful little fellow with a shaggy head and sticking-out teeth is pestering the life out of me. Finally, discovering that he couldn't swim, I had to take refuge in the pool of F deck, among the mermans and the mermaids.

"But he followed me there, and stood on the edge of the marble tank, for all the world like a clucking hen whose duckling has taken to the water! 'Why don't you kid him along and get him to stake you to the ship's pool—the other pool!—which is worth anything up to $2,000?' laughed one of the girls who was swimming about in the tank. 'He's a tobacco king, and worth millions! Why don't you play him along?'

"At that, another admirer of mine dived into the water near me, splashing the Persistent Pest from head to foot, and roaring with laughter at his discomfiture!

"I wonder . . . would Gary be jealous if he could see the success I am, without my trying a bit to be successful? I hope he would be a teeny bit jealous, because that would mean he really cared for me!

"But I shouldn't want to be with anyone else, if only . . . only . . . 'he' were on this ship!

TUESDAY

"Took dictation for radios from William B., and then —when I'd given them to a steward for immediate dispatch—I had to copy out whole sheaves of statistics and figures so involved that I had to borrow one of the machines from the Purser's office—the heavy kind with a long 'carrier' that takes the ship's log, and such!

"That occupied the morning, and a couple of hours after lunch.

"Went up to tea at 4:30 in the splendiferous saloon on B deck, where the orchestra, behind a great bank of flowers, was playing 'Samson et Delilah.'

"Countess Dellamanca was on a sofa with a young man. Apparently, she was acting the title role! The ship's doctor whispered to me, 'If those exotic sirens would quit cradle-snatching, and vamp their own husbands, there would be fewer divorces and the women themselves a whole heap happier.'

"Which seems quite logical. Through the thin cabin wall during the night I heard a funny little whimpering noise. I think it was the Countess Dellamanca—sobbing.

WEDNESDAY

"We dock at Havre early on Friday.

"And so to Paris! I'm so excited I can't think.

"Will 'he' be there?

"But I must put my mind on other things . . .

"They had Deck Sports today, and my partner and I won a prize at shuffle-board. With a long stick like a broom you push wooden discs along the deck, to land on chalked numbers. Deck-billiards, they also call this. You cannon off your opponents' discs, as in the old-fashioned game of croquet.

THURSDAY

"Our last day aboard. Had three invitations to take supper tonight after the dance, in the Ritz-Carlton restaurant. But I declined. Mr. Lingard insists, however, that I join a party with him and his niece, the Countess. She has become very gay, and almost cordial to me! A wireless came for her this afternoon, from Italy. Was it from her husband? It surely was not from Gary?

FRIDAY

"The coast of Normandy! My first glimpse of France!

"Shall I see *'him'* again?"

CHAPTER LII

THE boat-train that runs from Havre to Paris moved slowly out of its big shed.

At the window of a first-class compartment (there are three grades of travel on the French railroads) sat Aleda. She was athrill with joy and excitement—filled with tremendous zest. This was the France that she had read about!

Children in black overalls or smocks, their little hands outstretched for pennies (one cent was quite a windfall for them!) ran merrily alongside the moving train.

Old women—hatless, in ancient woolen shawls and endless petticoats—supported huge baskets of oranges. Below the windows, with much gesticulation, they peddled their wares.

The train gathered speed. Aleda removed her hat, leaned back comfortably to survey the scene.

How entirely different was this land from her own United States!

The picturesque small farms, red-roofed, with innumerable tiny orchards, and cabbage patches so little that they were no bigger than an ordinary dining-table! How thoroughly was every scrap of France under cultivation!

Women in wooden shoes—just like the picture of the Angelus! were working in the fields alongside the men. Enormous horses pulled heavy, two-wheeled carts. There were exquisite old chateaux, set in lovely smiling land-

scape, and along the country roads, workmen were pedalling to and from their labors on bicycles.

The Countess Dellamanca, surrounded by dressing-cases, smelling salts, eau-de-cologne, traveling pillows, soon was on the seat opposite Aleda, her eyes closed.

It had been slightly stormy just before their landing, and the niece of Aleda's employer felt "indisposed."

With difficulty, Aleda kept back little excited murmurs. How delightfully quaint and unexpected was this Normandy!

The Countess opened her eyes, reached for a gold-stoppered bottle, and put it delicately to her nostrils.

"I always think France so smelly!" whiffed she.

But Aleda was in no mood to listen to complainings. She was a female Columbus in new worlds, watching an old civilization enthusiastically!

"See the fishermen with the hand-poles! Oh! that must surely be the river Seine!" she exclaimed, unable to keep silent, her gaze on the reed-fringed stream below the railroad tracks. "The men look like statues—as though they'd been there since the French revolution!"

The Countess made a dainty moue, as though such common creatures were beneath her comment! "Why worry about the bourgeoisie?"

A smiling conductor promenaded the corridor. In French he cried: "Third luncheon is served."

The Countess forgot her mal-de-mer, and rose immediately. Briskly she said: "They have excellent food on these trains, and a glass of champagne will set me up."

She led the way through the violently swaying coaches to the little tables set under the long windows, each bearing its bottles of vintage.

Beaming waiters darted hither and yon. A contagious cheeriness emanates from French railroad servants, es-

pecially when in proximity to the good American dollar! There was exuberance, too, among the passengers—like children let loose from school on holiday—much popping of corks, and rattle of glasses.

"They drive their trains much too fast," said the Countess, "though I will say there aren't half so many accidents now, as just after the war! THEN it was a perfect scandal! NOW we're comparatively safe! Hi, garcon!"—she twisted her long body around, beckoning imperiously to a waiter—"a half bottle of 1914 Delbec!"

That revived her. She became quite pleasantly patronizing to Aleda, whose eager eyes drank in the unaccustomed scene most pleasurably, and who lent a scant ear to the Countess's talk.

Then she caught Gary Chester's name. She flushed a little.

"Such a charming fellow! My uncle thinks the world of his ability! He's on quite an important mission down in Italy. Have you ever met him?" the Countess asked.

Aleda nodded, trying to seem careless and indifferent.

About her meeting with Gary, how much did this sharp-eyed, sharp-voiced woman really know?

"Gary Chester has very frequently been my escort," remarked William B. Lingard's niece complacently.

The train glided into Paris. Blue-bloused, garlic-breathing porters streamed into the coaches, hurling luggage at each other through the windows, laughing good-naturedly, gesticulating, chattering like monkeys, eternaly seeking their beloved "pour boire" (which means, "to drink" or tip, pronounced "teep")!

Tiny little taxicabs flew, fast as fire-engines, in and out the railroad station, with red-cheeked and black-bearded drivers at the wheel.

And all was merriment and bustle and extraordinary

confusion over baggage and the customs—which fuss is so essentially French!

William B. Lingard got quick service. Soon he and his niece and secretary were careening in the best French taxi manner towards the Ritz.

According to the cable she had sent to Italy just one week ago, Gary might be at the hotel, waiting for them?

Her heart mounted, suffocating . . .

CHAPTER LIII

ALEDA—in her bedroom in the Ritz Hotel in Paris—stood before the long pier-glass and surveyed herself.

She had donned the rose taffeta robe de style that was so eminently becoming, which Marise had insisted that she purchase in New York before sailing.

Was it because she looked so beautiful, and knew that from the top of her shining head to her dainty slippers she was "just right" that Aleda was smiling and starry-eyed tonight?

Or was it that down in the foyer—waiting for William B. Lingard's party—was none other than Gary Chester, the young man of her heart?

She dabbed a touch of powder on that pretty face of hers—tentatively fluffing out an extra curl.

"O-o-oh! I'm so happy!" She stretched her two bare arms out, wide, as though encompassing the whole world.

The phone rang sharply. Came a volley of words in rapid male French.

A message from downstairs? She caught the name—"Lee-n-gard!" "They're waiting!" she told herself—took up a slim little wrap that her own clever fingers had fashioned from a strip of satin—a small evening bag Marise had given her as a "steamer present"—went out to the elevator, and so downstairs.

William B. Lingard moved to meet her. An affable, a fatherly smile was on his unusually grim face. He had

just finished fifteen minutes' conversation with young Gary Chester—enough to show what a first-class proposition was the Bianchi Water Power! The report from Chester had been excellent. His own opinion had been verified!

Therefore, the financier was in a benign mood.

"Mr. Chester has just been telling me that you and he are old friends." He placed a kind hand on Aleda's arm, and led her toward the tall, handsome young man in evening dress.

Never had this mouse-like little secretary looked so pretty or so animated, he decided. There was an incandescent, inward beauty tonight that lighted the small, delicately-featured face.

Was it possible—he gave a quick glance from one to the other—that this child was sweet on Gary Chester?—that the young fellow was fascinated by the little secretary?

William B. Lingard beamed again in great good humor. Business was excellent. Before leaving New York, he had had a romantic renewal with Marise Miller—known now as Marise de Renze—a long-ago sweetheart. She was a friend of Miss Ray's—she thought the world of this Aleda. For Marise's sake, and because life in general was roseate and they were in Paris, he would do everything to help this romance along . . . He would give a further opportunity for meeting, to Chester (a very decent chap) and this young girl!

* * * * * *

"My niece, the Countess, is on the Rue Cambon side of the hotel," announced William B. Lingard genially, "in other words, having a pre-dinner appetizer in the ladies' bar."

The Countess, it transpired, had run into many of her titled friends in the short space of time since her arrival. A spray of orchids on her shoulder, a bouquet of the same exotic blooms held in her lap, she was holding court among the cosmopolites.

And she was radiant! This was the playground of the world! This was the metier she loved!

If only—only——

But wasn't there a fly in every ointment? What would life be without the lure, the urge, of the one thing held back?

The party went to Ciro's. They were joined there by the Vicomte Cerno, an old friend of Lingard's.

Ciro's is perhaps the most expensive—and certainly the most famous—restaurant in Paris. Just off the Rue de la Paix, its little pink sign juts out into the Rue Danou, and through its exclusive portals step many interesting folks, including royalties.

At Aleda's elbow (in her simple little frock, she was the loveliest girl in Paris! thought young Chester) was the assidious young man.

"Passee"—like a gardenia whose petals have been touched by unkind fingers!—was the Countess Dellamanca, in comparison with this radiant young loveliness, tonight!

Wearing a red rose in his lapel, and a monocle, the manager greeted the new arrivals courteously.

In the Paris Ciro's there are two dining rooms, a large and small one. The Viscomte Cerno had an old and famous title. So had the Countess Dellamanca. Lingard was reputed very wealthy. The manager did not hesitate for the fraction of a second. Into the more intimate, exclusive, smaller room the party was piloted!

Gary Chester sat next to Aleda. To her, this little

restaurant—so happy was she!—swam in a golden light!

The food they ate—she only toyed with her portion, quite unaware of what she was eating; it was as the ambrosia of the gods. She sipped a little wine, just to be in the fashion and not appear conspicuous—although she required no stimulant, with Gary's eyes upon her. This wasn't wine. It was nectar of the gods . . .

He whispered to her, under cover of the general talk:

"Tomorrow at four, I'll call for you at the hotel. You're booked from then on—with me!"

Breath catching in her throat, she answered: "But I'm busy! I'm here to work—I'm Mr. Lingard's secretary!"

Said Gary: "I've already fixed the matter with Lingard. It's in order." Then, his fine eyes—warm and ardent—on her pretty, flushed young face, he added, sotto voce:

"There are so many things I have to say to you! Aleda . . . we're going to sail down the river Seine . . . by moonlight! . . . and dine together . . . you and I . . . in the beautiful forest of Saint Cloud!"

CHAPTER LIV

THE sun shone down upon the boulevards of Paris

Aleda—having finished the morning's work for her employer—looked out from her window in the Ritz Hotel into the wide sweep of the Place Vendome—and thought the world was beautiful!

At four o'clock, Gary was coming to fetch her. Mr. Lingard had said that she could have the entire evening off . . .

Gary was going to take her to the forest of Saint Cloud. The very name held romance . . .!

It was one o'clock, and she felt hungry. Should she have a sandwich sent up to her room, or venture forth?

Uncertain though her knowledge of the French tongue was, she decided on the latter course. Aleda felt extraordinarily exhilarated today, and not a scrap fatigued after the gay party at Ciro's last night.

There is something very stimulating in the air of Paris. Also, a contagious buoyancy from the happy spirit of the people.

And, added to that, there was the impending meeting with Gary!

Aleda stepped out into the Place Vendome, and proceeded towards the Madeleine.

She lingered now and then before the entrancing shop-windows along the Rue de la Paix.

In the open flower-market at the church of the Made-

leine, with the traffic whirling around it, fat old women under enormous cotton umbrellas sold their perfumed wares.

For three cents Aleda bought a fragrant spray of lily-of-the-valley that would have cost at least $2 back in the U. S. A.!

She found a comic litle restaurant with tiny tables planted on the side-walk. A quasi-privacy was afforded by means of a three-foot hedge of orange trees in tubs.

Aleda was amused . . . intrigued by the quaint French habit of eating one's meals in the open . . . nay, more, with the traffic and myriads of pedestrians right at one's elbow, so to say!

It was a very dainty, satisfying meal, however—perfectly cooked. An attractive, black-eyed garcon served her as though she were a little princess . . . hovering about.

The grand total, which included four courses and delicious coffee, amounted to sixteen cents in American cash!

"How beautiful you look! Like a rose!"

In the foyer of the Ritz, promptly at four o'clock, was Gary Chester. He came quickly forward to greet Aleda who, with the lily-of-the-valley fastened on one shoulder, was wearing her smart little sports suit of pink milanese.

She flushed and laughed, immensely happy. She said, with a lilt in her voice:

"If I'm a rose, I see you're wearing wallflower in your lapel! Taking that as a symbol, you're extraordinarily modest for a young man, aren't you?"

"Quite to the contrary. I'm the proudest fellow in Paris, right now!" He slipped a hand beneath her elbow, and—with an air of gay possessiveness—piloted her to

the exit. "I've been counting the minutes since last night till now!"

The sun shone down upon the couple as they headed for the Rue de Rivoli. In a smart gray suit, Gary was looking very handsome. It matched his eyes. Aleda thought he looked wonderful in gray.

"Would you like to go to the tea-dance at Claridge's? Or Fouquet's? We shan't go out to Saint Cloud till later on, I thought . . ." Aleda answered: "It seems a shame, in such gorgeous weather, to be indoors even for a minute——"

He looked pleased at that, said quickly: "Suppose we take a taxi to the Bois? It's cool out there."

The Bois de Boulogne? She'd love that! she declared. She'd have so little time in Paris, she wanted to see everything possible . . .

"But couldn't we ride in one of those funny little horse-carriages, where the drivers wear the tall white shiny hats?"

"That's the right spirit." The young man gave her arm a tiny pressure. Here was a girl after his own heart! "I'd have suggested a 'fiacre' myself, but I thought maybe you had the usual American mania for speed!"

They were entering the wide sweep of that magnificent architectural lay-out, the Place de la Concorde.

"Oh! Exquisite!" came from Aleda's beauty-loving heart.

In the great open square, with the garden of the Tuileries on the one side, and the Champs Elysees on the other, flowing off into the distance, spacious beds of roses nodded pretty, knowing heads. Lonely statuary peeped through the chestnut trees on every hand. Fountains tinkled. A thousand automobiles, on pleasure bent, at a great speed flew hither and yon.

Gary hailed a funny old horse-drawn vehicle of the landau type.

Aleda leaned back on the cushions by the side of Gary, as they clopetty-clopped (the sound of the hoofs was really quite in keeping with the tinkleness of Paris! she decided) up that magnificent boulevard known as the Champs Elysees.

Trees lined the route, with the inevitable statues gleaming through the foliage here and there.

Restaurants—all white, and looking like enormous wedding-cakes—were set among the green, and people were sipping tea out on the lawns under striped umbrellas.

They reached the Arc de Triomphe, and turned left into the famous Avenue. Palatial buildings flanked the route. There were horsemen, and crowds of promenaders, and the bright gleam of motor cars.

At its end was the Bois, a bewildering labyrinth of paths and trees and glinting water.

"Ah! this is fairyland!" Aleda breathed, drunk with its loveliness and with the nearness of Gary Chester . . .

"It's heaven—because you're here!" whispered the young man at her side.

CHAPTER LV

GARY dismissed the "fiacre" with its ancient horse and driver at that lovely waterfall, Les Cascades, and—with Aleda at his side—roamed in the beautiful Bois de Boulogne.

They were happy as two children out from school—nay, more! A "something" pulsed between them . . . thrilling . . . tremulous . . . When he touched the girl's elbow, didn't an electric shock rush from the point of contact to her heart, and set it madly throbbing?

Was this love?

Ah yes! There couldn't be another name for this strange, stabbing ecstasy . . .

Down winding little paths among the greenery they walked, those two. This wasn't grass? Their feet were perched upon Parnassus!

* * * * * *

At the "Pre Catalan"—that smart rendezvous for tea set in the woodland of the Bois—Aleda, under a striped umbrella near the entrance of the restaurant, sat with Gary Chester.

The restaurant was crammed. The races had just finished for the day out at Auteuil, and visitors from all parts of the globe, also Parisians, stopped here on their way back for a refresher . . .

It was a glamourous scene. Women in vivid and ex-

travagant toilettes gave a theatrical aspect to the woodlands. There were handsome Englishmen, immaculately groomed. Dark Argentines—their wives and sweethearts heavily pearl-roped and much be-diamoned. And sleek-haired gigolos galore—professional dance-partners for the unescorted!

Aleda was tremendously intrigued.

A tango was in progress, and through the glass sides of the big restaurant she could see the swaying dancers. A tzigane band from the Cafe de Paris was playing a nerve-thrilling melody.

The music ended, and through the door—in the full flood of late sunshine of this July day—appeared a vision in a violet chiffon frock, a weedy and anemic escort at her side.

"It's Countess Dellamanca!" breathed Aleda, her heart sinking with apprehension.

Hadn't Mr. Lingard's niece been greatly attracted by Gary? She looked, at this moment, very discontented. And Aleda knew already of her predatory, man-snatching ways!

The instant she saw Gary her face lighted. She came swiftly towards him, her violet draperies fluttering in bacchante fashion in the breeze.

"You? Here? This is a pleasure!" She held out a white-gloved hand, ignoring Aleda's presence. "I'm with Vicomte Cerno—such a dull, tiresome creature!—I've been bored stiff! And I lost 10,000 francs at the races! No luck at all—until now——" —she gave Gary a flashing, captivating smile, full of meaning—"this meeting's a godsend!"

Aleda did not think so. She could give it quite a different name, she told herself.

The Vicomte, and the Countess Dellamanca seated

themselves at the table, the latter with her back turned to Aleda, and her bold eyes on Gary's face. "Order me a champagne cocktail, quick! And a packet of Egyptians!" Then, in a sibilant, "carrying" whisper she leaned towards him, her white-gloved hand on his arm, in provocative fashion: "I want you to dine with me—alone —tonight?"

* * * * * *

Two hours later, Aleda and Gary landed at Saint Cloud from the Seine river-boat.

It had been difficult, diplomatically speaking, to break away from the predatory and determined Countess.

But Gary had contrived to pry both himself and Aleda loose . . .

"We'll dine on the balcony of the Pavillon Bleu. It's on the edge of the forest," suggested Gary, in great fettle again.

And while they ate their meal al fresco, and looked into each other's eyes in the rose-lit, rose-entwined veranda, with the clean odor of the forest all about them, Aleda felt that life could hold no greater happiness.

A country fair, or "fete," was in gay progress not far off. There were the cries of joyous children, and the gay tinkle of a concertina, and, farther away, the music of a merry-go-round.

"Seems as though the French peasants had solved the secret of real happiness," said Gary, reaching across the tiny table and touching Aleda's hand.

"How so?" She smiled enchantingly at Gary.

"Marriage—permanent marriage without any thought of divorce or new-fangled nonsense—real home-life, each tackling the situation, shoulder to shoulder—no divided paths where the wife goes the one way and her

husband the other—and, of course, CHILDREN——"

Aleda said, shyly: "I'm very fond of children. And I think a marriage without them is—a great pity——"

"To that I heartily agree," quickly responded Gary.

They lingered over coffee, there on the balcony, not talking much.

Thereafter, they visited the funny little country fete, and Aleda won a prize—a little pig made out of gingerbread—for driving a plaster piglet into its shed.

"Let's take a walk in the forest now," suggested Gary.

Through the scented dusk they rambled, till they came to a clearing on the edge of a small lake. It was quiet here, and very lovely.

High in the heavens above their heads there was the first glimmer of the moon.

Aleda leaned against a gnarled old tree, and sighed ecstatically.

"Somehow I do not feel three thousand miles from home!"

And Gary, very gently, very tenderly, put his arms about her.

"Because—just being together—you and I—like THIS —will always be real home for US—Aleda!"

CHAPTER LVI

GOLDIE DE RENZE—three thousand miles from the love affairs of Gary and Aleda, but cherishing a distinct animosity against the pair of them—sat in the hotel in Saratoga where she had her dance-engagement for the Summer season, and perused a letter that had just come from Clive.

"The tricky rat!" said she, biting her underlip.

She had written him to Montreal (where he was up on bootlegging business) anent her share of the "hush money" he had wrung from foolish little Mr. Smithson!

The secret roof apartment, where Smithy—alias Briggs—gave his merry little parties!

Having supplied the latter with champagne at $500, the artful Clive had extracted a considerably larger sum as the price of his silence—in other words, blackmail money!

"I shan't trouble you again if you meet my figure. Considering how much is at stake for you, you will admit it's moderate! And I should hate to be so ungentlemanly as to reveal certain facts to your wife!"

Smithy—alias Briggs—was in the coils of the python.

But Goldie had no pity for her quondam friend. There was only a tigerish resentment that she hadn't got her share of the hush money . . .

She'd get it yet. She'd grab what ought to be coming to her, even if she had to throttle Clive!

She'd like to throttle Clive! Would enjoy gripping

with merciless fingers his long, Adam's-appled throat!

But it behooved her not to quarrel with him in the meantime. Until she got that money from him, and in order to make Marise suffer the pangs of jealousy (she was convinced that Marise was fascinated by the Englishman, and so she—Goldie—would do her best to hurt her by taking Clive away from her!) she ought to be very sweet to Clive!

Her eye traveled down the letter he had just sent to her.

Rum-running across the Canadian border? That was his present game.

"So he wants me to meet him with a car? Afraid that the Federal officers are on his track?"

"I'll double-cross him! I'll have him arrested! I'll give his game away!"

But that wouldn't do her—Goldie—any good—not in the circumstances.

With Clive in jail, what chance would there be that he would pay?

And money was what she wanted. Immediate money —"oodles" of it—so that she could queen it over Aleda, and take Gary Chester away from her (Goldie had an exaggerated idea of her own charms, especially if augmented with the almighty dollar, so that she could dress magnificently) and at the same time she'd get even with Marise . . .

She ground her small, sharp teeth with fury when she thought how Marise had deceived her all these years!

Marise was her mother, not her sister! She, Goldie—not a de Renze—(how often she had boasted of her aristocratic Spanish ancestry!) but an ordinary girl of very ordinary stock, and her father a common criminal!

* * * * * *

Without further deliberation, she telegraphed to Clive that she would meet him with a car at a certain spot.

"It's risky, Clive. You say you think there may be an ambush? You hadn't a right to drag me into this awful mess!"

Loaded with contraband, the man who had so legally involved Goldie, sat by her side at the wheel of the machine.

She had met him at the point specified on his map of the highway.

He had transferred his load, with her assistance, into the tonneau of the relay car that she had brought for him. "There isn't any danger, if you keep your head!" His voice was tense and gruff.

"You mayn't get through, this time! Those prohibition agents are keen as sleuth-hounds! They'll stop us. They'll call your bluff."

"Shut up, and don't nag. I've got a gun. If need be I'll use it——"

"God, you wouldn't? You wouldn't make me a—a murderess?"

Thoughts of a recent hanging—of a girl's neck barely escaping the noose—of a life sentence meted out to her for something almost similar—whirled through Goldie's brain.

An "accessory" . . . they'd call her that . . . these judges! To be shut away forever from this gay old world . . .!

"Lemme get out! You stop this car!" Her voice rose.

Clive's only answer was to step harder on the gas. The car was going much too fast! . . . Over these roads it rocked and swayed! . . .

"Keep quiet! We're near the danger point!" Clive's

eyes—near-set and now narrowed to a pin point—were on the winding highway.

"You promise me my share of Smithy's money? Swear to me that you will give me half!" Her voice was in his ear. It sounded like the hiss of a cobra.

He'd show her! He wasn't going to be bullied and commanded by any little Broadway chorine!

"I'll give you what I choose to give you, and if you make any kick about it, you won't get anything! That's flat! I know enough about you—that flower shop was running an illegal business on the side, and it was all done in your name, you little fool!—to put you in the hands of the police!"

She gave a scream that was half fury at what he'd just said to her, and half fear at the fast pace of the car. She grabbed the wheel, just like a crazy creature . . . there was a terrible swerve . . . the crash of the axle on a boulder . . . a shattering flash as Clive was hurled through the wind-shield . . .

He came to, a few mintes later. Aching from head to foot, blood on his face and hands, he crawled to the overturned car.

Caught beneath the wreck was Goldie. Her face was ghastly white . . . her eyes already glazed.

He could just reach her heart. He put his blood-stained hand over it . . .

There wasn't even the faintest flutter . . .

He put his ear against her lips. There was no breath . . .

He touched her face. It was quite cold . . .

Goldie was dead!

CHAPTER LVII

ALEDA walked up and down the deck of a home-going American boat.

Despite the progress of her love-affair, in Paris, her face was grave.

Gary had gone back to Italy on his investigations.

The Countess Dellamanca, bound for Lido-Venice, had traveled with him.

Aleda wasn't jealous. She trusted Gary. There was nothing definite of which she was afraid.

And yet, now that she was away from him, she felt anxious. She loved him so. Suppose an accident should happen to him?

There had been a railroad smash in Italy, quite recently!

Roaming around, as Gary must, among the huge dams that stemmed the Italian lakes and rivers, was it not possible that he might be injured . . .?

Or, in his capacity as engineer—she'd read, not long ago, of something similar—he might accidentally touch a voltage cable or a highly charged wire, and be electrocuted!

"Oh! I'm a fool to be so nervous!"

But it persisted, on this gray day, when the sky was weeping tears on a very grim and billowy Atlantic!

She thought of Goldie! Such a tragic end to a young life! In the Paris edition of the New York Herald—

on the morning following her dinner at Saint Cloud with Gary (what an enchanted evening that had been!)—she had read about the fatal motor accident.

Goldie was dead! Clive Mortimer only bruised and cut and shaken—but under arrest, for running a rum cargo into the United States from Canada!

And poor Marise! What of her grief and loneliness?

"She adored Goldie! It's all too terrible!" Aleda paced up and down the damp deck.

It did seem as though love always brought sure suffering!

She had cabled Marise her deepest sympathy, immediately on reading the tragic news item.

William B. Lingard, too, had dispatched a long message.

"If only he and she would make it up, and marry, that would be the best thing in the world that could happen to poor Marise!"

With Countess Dellamanca off the track of her uncle (and William B. Lingard's niece would certainly veto the match, were she within range), wasn't there some chance that her old sweetheart would offer Marise a new chance in life?

Marise had seemed so happy recently.

She still cared for Lingard. She had never really loved the ne'er-do-well Englishman, Clive Mortimer, and now—responsible in a way as he was for the death of the adored, spoiled Goldie—to Goldie's mother he would be anathema!

He was in jail, too, and likely to remain there for some time.

Aleda's thoughts went back to Gary.

It was odd that he had sent no farewell cable to the ship . . .

It was a house of mourning on West Fortieth Street. In her room upstairs, the shades drawn down, and staring dully into space, Aleda found Marise.

When the latter saw her friend, the tension broke. Marise wept uncontrollably.

"She was so young—only a child, Aleda! If I'd—if I'd only taken better care of her—kept her away from this city and all the temptations of life on Broadway—Goldie—my little girl—would be alive today."

Aleda sought to comfort her. But in the face of such suffering, what could one say?

"You were wonderful to Goldie—always! You've nothing in the world to reproach yourself with!"

"That Clive! If only I'd never known him! It was through being with him—and I'm responsible!—that Goldie met her death!"

"Hush, hush, Marise! It was all taken out of your hands. Don't blame yourself!"

"I must! If I'd only kept her in the country—kept her away from these bad associations—Goldie would be here, with us!"

"But you had to earn your living. There was nothing the matter with the Harvest Moon, your little club."

"It was the wrong environment for Goldie." Marise drew a deep, sobbing breath, and reached for another handkerchief. "It was there we met Clive. And there were others——"

"But Goldie was a professional dancer?" Aleda tried to ease the sore heart of the dead girl's mother, who her years had struggled for her child unselfishly. "She had to get engagements somewhere! And she was under your eye most of the time!"

"I've been what the Bible calls a—a faithless steward! Goldie was my charge! I didn't take care of her right!"

The Harvest Moon was closed. Even had Marise had the heart to go there (which she hadn't) it had failed financially.

Marise was on the rocks—a bit of flotsam flung there by a ruthless fate—bankrupt in spirit and in money.

* * * * * *

"Mr. Lingard—pardon me for speaking about it—but I'm so worried about my friend—you know her—Miss de Renze——"

Back in the office again, Aleda stood at her employer's desk.

"Hum! Ah!" He adjusted horn-rimmed glasses. "The death of her daughter must—er—er—have shaken her—considerably?"

"It did. She doesn't eat or sleep. She's all broken up about it."

He cleared his throat. He said, nervously: "And no doubt the—the other matter—is upsetting her? I understood from her daughter that Miss—er—er—de Renze was engaged to be married to that man who was with her daughter at the time of the accident . . . who is now in the hands of the law for rum-running . . . that Englishman?"

CHAPTER LVIII

"You are mistaken!" said Aleda, her earnest eyes on her employer as she stood in the inner office by his desk. "Marise de Renze was never at any time engaged to Clive Mortimer. In my opinion——" —she was greatly daring, but for Marise's sake she'd make the venture—"there has only been one man she's ever really cared about!"

William B. Lingard cleared his throat. He was much agitated by this conversation. Aleda could see that.

"Sit down, Miss Ray. I—I appreciate your kindly interest in your friend. And in the sudden and tragic death of her—er—er—her daughter, she has been greatly bereaved!"

"She has. She's a very fine woman, Mr. Lingard."

Forgetting her shyness, in Marise's cause, and the difference in position between herself and her employer, Aleda drew a chair close to him, seated herself, and fixed pleading, anxious eyes upon his rugged face.

He tapped with a nervous finger on a blotter. "Miss de Renze has my deepest sympathy. I've known her for some time. She's had, I understand, a pretty hard life?"

"Immensely so."

"And now that her—er—er—her friend is under arrest —taken in conjunction with the loss of her daughter— it makes it doubly difficult for her?"

"If you mean Clive Mortimer, his share in the acci-

dent when Goldie was killed is certainly terrible for Marise to think about—but I am sure, beyond that, she has no personal feeling for the man, unless it's hatred! I would, too, were I in her shoes!"

Through his horn-rimmed glasses, William B. Lingard gave his young secretary a swift appraising glance.

Had she come here at the other's request—as Marise's emissary?

But no! the pretty face, so naively in earnest was open as the day.

She was acting on her own initiative, prompted by sincere sympathy and affection for her friend.

Marise de Renze was in need of money? Miss Ray, on her behalf, had come to him for help?

Was it not possible, despite what his secretary had just told him, that Marise was definitely involved with this rum-running fellow, and required immediate cash to bail him out?

But that would be quite useless. Unless he jumped his bond, the fellow would get at least a year's imprisonment, followed by deportation.

Perhaps she wanted money to employ an attorney?

Through William B. Lingard's shrewd business mind darted a whole series of disturbing thoughts.

He rapped out, after a pause: "Has that little night club at which she was hostess and entertainer been 'padlocked?' I take it that this rum-running attempt was on her behalf?"

"Oh, no! Marise never countenanced the sale of liquor," defended Aleda. "It was because he smuggled some into the Harvest Moon once or twice, against her orders, that Marise quarreled with Clive."

"She won't be involved in this case, then, when it comes up for trial?"

"No—except as being Goldie's mother—Marise has nothing to do with the affair."

"I'm glad of that."

"But the Harvest Moon's gone bankrupt," announced Aleda. "I suppose because Marise wouldn't sell liquor to her customers, it didn't pay expenses. So she's broke."

"And that's why you've come to me today?" From a pigeon-hole in his desk he drew out a checkbook, holding it towards Aleda. "Make out what you think is necessary, and I'll sign——"

The girl flushed scarlet, putting her two hands behind her back.

"No! No! I never thought of such a thing! Marise would be furious!" She bit her underlip. Here was an "impasse."

William B. Lingard was regarding her, a puzzled expression on his face.

"Then what——?"

How dense he was! Didn't he realize that Marise cared for him? That he'd been in her heart these many weary years?

Oh! for diplomacy!

"She's broken-hearted," blurted out Marise's champion, "she doesn't eat or sleep and, unless something's done quick—unless someone she cares about can rouse her—goodness alone knows what'll happen! At nights I hear her sobbing, and talking to herself! She's heading for brain fever—a sanitarium—maybe suicide! Oh! don't you understand?" And Aleda, tears in her eyes, leaned forward and gripped her employer's hand.

A light began to dawn on him.

He mumbled:—"What was that you said in the beginning? Something about 'only one man in her life

she's really cared about'? Did you mean her first husband?"

"Husband nothing!" cried Aleda, casting prudence to the winds, and eyes overflowing. "You—Mr. Lingard—you're the person Marise has never, all these years, forgotten. You're the one man Marise has always cared about!"

* * * * * *

At 9 o'clock that evening, Aleda—who had been out in Central Park for a breath of air—reentered the house on West Fortieth Street.

Marise—although the night was torrid—had refused to accompany her. Marise wanted to be alone.

As Aleda—full of anxiety for her friend—let herself into the hall with her latchkey, she heard the sound of subdued voices coming from the living room.

The lights had not been turned on yet, but through the unshaded window a shaft of illumination penetrated from an arc-lamp in the street outside.

Marise was on the old settee, a man's arm protectingly around her shoulders, her tear-stained face half hidden on the sleeve of his coat!

"My darling!" he was saying to Marise, over and over again. "My darling . . ."

The man was William B. Lingard!

CHAPTER LIX

"'THE years that the locust has eaten,'" William B. Lingard was quoting softly, to Marise. "Let me restore them to you, darling! Let me bring back just a little happiness into your life!"

Aleda—the unseen spectator in the lobby—wiped her eyes. Her heart was glad—glad for this other woman. She rejoiced with her.

For Marise loved this sweetheart of the long ago. She knew it. Always Marise had cherished the memory of this man.

How wonderful to think that now—perhaps through her own instigation, for she had spoken bravely on Marise's behalf only this morning—Lingard had come back into Marise's life!

His love—the reassurance of it—would be balm to heal that wounded heart of hers.

And he could give Marise every comfort.

But it wasn't for his money—rich as he was—that Marise loved Lingard. It was a deep, true feeling of affection that the bitter waters of tribulation had never quenched and the fires of sorrow only purified!

Aleda moved, very softly, so as not to disturb them, toward the stairs.

It was almost dark at the rear of the lobby. But her eye caught the glimmer of a small, square whiteness on the table underneath the telephone.

A letter? She grabbed it quickly, went softly down to the basement and in the kitchen turned on the light.

Gary's writing! The Milan postmark! Her heart throbbed excitedly.

She tore the flap open and pulled out the contents. With trembling fingers she smoothed the sheets. She read, with a swift eagerness:

"'Darling Aleda—It seemed as though the whole world had come to an end when I kissed you goodbye in that dreary Paris station! But it won't be long now until I'm home. I'm counting the hours, like a love-sick schoolboy! Darling, it will be glorious to be with you again!

"'I shall never forget that wonderful evening out at Saint Cloud. You won't forget it either, will you, dearest? It will live forever—just as my love will live—deep in my heart . . .

"'I wired an order to Havre for fresh pink roses to be sent for you aboard the boat."

"They didn't come," said Aleda to herself. She read on, happily:

"'Pink roses—or, if it were still Spring, like when we first met—apple blossoms, remind me of you, my darling. You're the prettiest girl in the whole wide world, and the sweetest, and the only one I've ever wanted, and will always want!

"'The journey down into Italy was a bit depressing, since every turn of the wheels was taking me farther and farther from you. The Countess did her best to revive my drooping spirits—we lunched and dined together on the train, but I'm afraid I was horribly "distrait." Indeed, she rebuked

me once or twice for not listening to what she was saying . . .

" 'Then I started telling her what a wonderful girl I thought you were . . . .!' "

Said Aleda to herself, proudly: "He means it! He can't keep it a secret! There isn't going to be anything hidden about his love."

She wondered how the Countess Dellamanca had taken his attitude, since she herself had been strongly attracted by the same man?

"What does it matter? Gary's all mine!" with a little thrill Aleda told herself. She read on, eyes shining:

" 'The Countess seemed a bit astonished, which seems odd, considering that I hadn't eyes for anyone but you, those days in Paris—and at the Cafe, the night you arrived. I really thought I'd given the game away, complete! Real love is difficult to hide, Aleda darling! And I'm no hand at subterfuge!

" 'At telegram from her husband reached the Countess at Milan, and, believe me, she was a different woman immediately! I always thought her a bit of a vamp, as it were—at least, shallow—you understand—but when she read that wire she was as excited as a schoolgirl! She told me they'd a quarrel several months ago, but now her husband—I think she's really in love with him, and Italians don't stand for a great deal of nonsense and shilly-shallying in women, especially wives—had agreed to take her back.

" 'He was the greatest lover in the world! And now he and I will have a second honeymoon!' she said to me.

"'And you and I will soon have a "first one," won't we, Aleda darling? A miraculous honeymoon . . . where you choose . . . just so long as you say "Yes"!'"

Aleda read that letter half a dozen times, her heart brimful of happiness.

* * * * * *

One week later, William B. Lingard's former secretary, recovered from her operation, came back.

"Ought I to resign?" Aleda wondered.

Her employer called her into his sanctum early that day. He said gruffly as was his wont: "Your work has been very satisfactory, and we can still make room for you here, if you care to stay on. There won't be a great deal to do, however, with my secretary back, and myself off on a trip that will take some weeks."

"May I think it over?" asked Aleda. Gary would be back in a few days' time—it would be nice to have freedom to be with him then—but for her parents' sake, as well as her own, she required her salary.

William B. Lingard said: "Certainly, think it over. And if and when you decide to leave, the cashier will give you an extra week's salary."

At half-past six that evening when she reached home there was a telegram there addressed to her.

Was it from Gary? Or her people?

She tore it open, half afraid.

It was headed: "White Plains."

It ran:

"William Lingard and I were married here this afternoon. We are off to Rocky Mountains and Grand Canyon on quiet motoring honeymoon. Fond love from Marise."

CHAPTER LX

MARISE was married!

Her fingers trembling with excitement, Aleda held up the telegram, reading it again and yet again . . .

"It's the best thing that could have happened!" she told herself. "If something hadn't been done quick, to rouse her—with all her troubles, and the tragedy of poor Goldie—she'd have gone crazy—she'd have had to go into a sanitarium!"

Now. Marise had found her greatest comforter in life.

And Aleda was glad to know she was secure . . . glad to the heart that Marise had married the man she truly—and for so long—had loved.

There would be no further worry about money, too, for Marise. Lingard had more money than either of them would ever need.

Thinking of how Marise, in her now altered circumstances, would have loved to shower the good things of life on Goldie—gone forever—Aleda pondered on the irony of fate.

Was there a meaning and a purpose to this Chinese puzzle of existence?

Was there a divine working behind it all?

Or did things just happen anyhow?

Sometimes it seemed—as in the case of Marise and Goldie—that they came too late?

But no! Aleda had her own convictions. "We aren't meant to tear aside the veil . . . but there is . . . there must be . . . a divine purpose back of every happening!"

Tonight, with Marise gone, and Gary so far away, and her job at the office topsy-turvy, Aleda felt extraordinarily lonely in the big empty house on West Fortieth Street.

But she was glad—so glad—that Marise, the storm-tossed, had sailed into a sure haven. Marise had found peace at last—security—and love.

* * * * * *

A sunny afternoon down at the New York docks. Gary—a sun-burned, grinning, wildly delighted Gary—bounded across the gangplank of a newly arrived Italian liner to his waiting sweetheart.

"Aleda!" He kissed her ardently, over and over, and the moment he got through with the customs, he whirled off in a taxicab.

They had so much to tell each other.

He had read, in the ship's wireless bulletin, about the marriage of Lingard and Marise.

"And we're going to follow suit immediately, my dearest!" He started kissing his beloved again.

"But—Gary—my job? My people?" Aleda was thrilled by his impetuosity and yet dubious.

"'But me no buts'! I just can't let you go again! Hi! driver! The City Hall—Municipal Building—make it quick!"

"Gary! You're crazy!" Aleda drew back. Her heart was throbbing with excitement. Here was a real caveman!

They went into the Marriage License Bureau, and in

no time at all the papers were got ready—applications filled out—and signed by the pair.

"Let's have the real ceremony up home," Aleda pleaded, thinking of the old folks, and their wondering and hurt disappointment at being deprived of being present on such a great occasion in the life of their only child!

Gary gave in.

They drove to the McAlpin and down in the grill discussed their affairs.

"Don't keep me waiting, darling!" begged Gary, his fine eyes drinking in the beauty of the flushed and pretty face.

"But we—we've known each other such a—a short time, Gary!" Aleda, at this moment, was the eternal, provocative Eve. She loved him so. She was afraid to let him see the depths of her devotion. She had the woman's instinct, age-old, to hide her real heart.

But she couldn't say him nay, however. Gary's mind was set on a speedy marriage.

" 'Happy the wooing that's not long a-doing!' " he quoted blithely.

"My work? You see, sweeheart," said she, anxious to set everything before him, "my father and mother have very little money and—and I help them with my salary. If I give up the job, what will happen? We mustn't be selfish, Gary, dear!"

He caught her hands in his across the little table. He looked into the forget-me-not blue eyes, tears of joy and excitement and uncertainty swimming in their loveliness, and it seemed to him that in their depths lay everything he wanted in a woman . . . utter devotion . . . nobility of character . . . unselfishness . . . and loyalty.

"Aleda . . . dearest . . . I made such a pile

of money over the Italian contracts that your father and mother need never bother about ways and means again! I'll fix things for them so they'll be mighty comfortable! And you said yourself that Lingard's former secretary is back on the job, and he only offered to 'make' a place for you, so why stay on? And with Marise married, she'll be giving up that house on West Fortieth Street, and my little sweetheart will be without a refuge in this big city ——" —he laughed gaily, his eyes all twinkles—"so why not do the deed, and let me take care of her?"

It seemed unanswerable!

* * * * * *

They were married on a glorious, sun-lit day up in the Adirondacks, in Aleda's home not far from Indian Lake.

And as they drove away from the little farm, with her father and mother and the simple neighbors who had known the girl from babyhood waving farewells to the happy couple, and the sun shining down on them like a benediction, Gary whispered to his young bride:

"I'll do my very, very best to make you happy, and to be worthy of you, Aleda!"

She looked into his eyes. Her lips met his.

This thrilling happiness was the great miracle which makes the world spin round! Here—in the arms of Gary—was love's ecstasy!

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Sonia Marsh goes to San Francisco to seek a new life and a happy one but she finds everything is not smooth sailing. After many harrowing experiences she finally marries the man she loves.

SEQUEL TO SONIA

It continues the life story of Sonia Marsh, who left her small town to go to the city, where she falls in love with a Doctor and marries him.

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